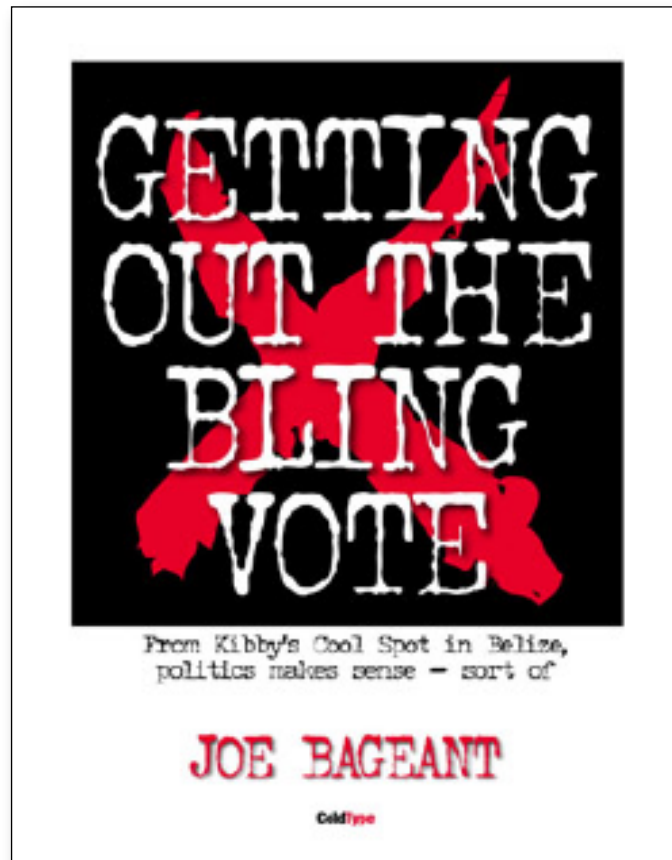


GETTING
OUT THE
BLING
VOTE

From Kibby's Cool Spot in Belize,
politics makes sense – sort of

JOE BAGEANT

ColdType



Joe Bageant is the author of the recently-published book, **Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War** from Random House Crown.

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 <http://joebageant.com>.

Feel free to contact him at joebageant@joebageant.com

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HOPKINS VILLAGE, BELIZE: I know it's unpatriotic as hell, but I just cannot get a hard-on about the '08 American presidential elections. As in, I haven't read or heard a word about them in a couple of weeks and could care less whether Hillary showed publicly some emotion, which was the big news when I left the States. The will just isn't there. And it's even more difficult from here in this Central American village where so many people have real problems. The kind that that come with being born under one empire, the British one, and living in the shadow of the present American one's walled fortress of armed privilege. One of those problems is who to sell your vote to and for how much. "I wan too hunned an feefy dollah for my vote," Marie declares as she chops up bananas to make tapo for dinner. I got feefy for my vote las' time, but some people got two feefy."

"Well you're not gonna get any more than fifty, babe," I tell her. "You gotta be more important to get two fifty for your vote. Did you bring anyone else to the polls?"

"No. Le' dem get dey own money."

"End of story then. If you'd brought along some other voters, you might have been up to two fifty by now"

"Den I no vote jus to spite dem."

Belizean politics works that way. On February 7 Belizeans will cast their ballots in the national election for candidate of either the liberal People's United Party (PUP) or the conservative United Democratic Party (UDP). Between now and then the People's United Party will hand out a lot of cash and pay off a lot of voter's outstanding bills. Once every five years it's payday for the poor, who consider their ballot a net cash asset worth \$50-100 Belizean dollars (USD\$25-50) or more. Here in Hopkins, fifty Belizean dollars pays the village utilities water bill for a year. Then, too, voters here often feel that their "vote money" is likely to be all they'll ever get from what they consider an unresponsive government. It's hard to argue against this "one in the hand is worth two in the bush"

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reasoning if you live their lives. There's a certain pragmatism, even ironic fairness in vote bribery here. On the other hand, it's a sorry system in which the actual voters are monetarily corrupted by the politicians. I'm more accustomed to the American system, where voters are corrupted morally and intellectually by media. In either case, free market politics is the handful of corruptive mud thrown into the fishbowl. We cannot see a damned thing but what is closest to our noses, usually put there by a politician.

It ain't the Mayo Clinic, but the needles are clean

Indeed, the Belizean government is fucked up, misled, inefficient and corrupt. All things taken into accord, however, in some respects Belizeans get back more than Americans get in return from their government, considering how much Americans work and pay (15 times more than Belizeans), beginning with health care. Belizeans at least have free health clinics in the cities and villages, and dirt cheap higher education, about USD\$15 a credit hour. These systems may not be as glossy as their profiteering American equivalent, especially the public hospitals here. But it ain't China, where hospitals do blood transfusions out of Pepsi bottles (according to American media, anyway) and it's not rural India where poorer patients often sleep under the beds of more heeled patients. In any case Belize does not have 47 million people with no access to health care at all, and a not-so-good hospital beats no hospital. In fact, a not-so-good hospital beats even Johns Hopkins if Johns Hopkins won't let you in because you cannot pay the freight.

Same goes for public schools. The school system is a wreck. But so is the American system. Both graduate kids who can't find their own country on a map, the main difference being that Belizean kids don't demonstrate it on YouTube. As an underdeveloped country, we are also way behind in school shootings and sexual assaults, and have yet to install a metal detector anywhere, so far as I know, even in airports, much less schools. Hope remains of catching up: U.S. Bloods and Crips moved into Belize City last year and have been shooting up the joint.

As for the Belizean trade school and higher educational system, my wife and I are helping a Garifuna boy through one, and I cannot say it is inferior to ours, just less plushly equipped. In fact, I'd say on the average the Belizean kids work much harder once they are in college, simply because it's harder to get there in the first place. James, our guy in trade school over in Dangriga Town, is making perfect grades, while working uphill against hardships such as an arduous daily bus ride and seldom even having lunch money. In the end though, American or

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Belizean, it all depends on the young person's grasp of reality. James grasps that studying computer science has removed him from the village streets where so many of his peers now languish, and probably will for the rest of their lives – or at least until the gringo resorts hire them as slave wage gardeners and maids. Meanwhile, his mom's \$50 vote bribe buys a fair slug of lunch supplies. Once every five years during national elections.

Buy mi vote, but don't tief it, mon

The people's democratic voice may be bought and sold at the voter level, but on the other hand, as a Garifuna friend Harry pointed out yesterday, "This is not the United States. It is impossible to "tief" (steal) an election here." Which is sure enough true. Combined forces of international and party monitors intensely watch the utterly countable and recountable paper balloting process like frigate birds circling over a pile of fish guts. Voters may arrive at the polls for less than savory reasons, but the vote count, at least until Diebold gets into Belize, is secure as hell. Until then the only way to undermine the power of the vote is to buy it.

When Belize gained independence in 1981 optimism ran high; Election Day was a jubilant one of national pride. Vote bribery was rare if at all, and politics, though yeasty with its own intrigues, was fairly uncorrupted and diverse as hell. Crazy, yes, but straight up as the sick game of politics goes. Before the International Monetary Fund, the DEA, the foreign "investors," foreign banks, cruise ship lines, and everybody else got Belize by the short hair, there was a leftist vitality not possible today. You had political activists declaring solidarity with the American Black Panthers, indigenous peoples of the planet, human rights and Cuba. Malcolm X and Che were not yet media trivialized into \$10 posters and \$19 tee shirts. Most of that day's young Belizean radicals are now silver-haired PUP politicians buying votes today. But back in 1968, even current prime minister Said Musa (a Palestinian blooded Belizean native) was a young firebrand lawyer organizing protests against American imperialism, capitalist exploitation and the Vietnam War. Along with Assad Shoman, who would later become foreign minister, he struck blows for black nationalism in a wary, conservative, British colonial Belize. Which is why it is so disheartening today to hear that over seven million is missing from the passport receipts, which are directly under Mr. Musa.

Both of Belize's main parties are crooked as a dog's hind leg. The only difference is where they toss the swag they do not mismanage or steal. A billion dollars seems to be missing from the national kitty as the shadier elements of both

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parties in the government scam Belize's oil, tourism and retirement/leisure condo development bucks. (To give some idea of scale, a billion dollars would give every household in this tiny country \$100 a day for over 140 years.) The PUP party tosses more money to the people, recently instituting a social security program worth about USD\$40 a month, and most of all, schools. When it comes to throwing money at the nation's education problems, PUP gets no better results than the U.S. Democrats. After building 1,100 classrooms and improving teacher training, and funding college education for teachers, the country's student failure rate has jumped to an all time high – 65%. The dropout rate keeps climbing. The conservative UDP, which resists money for education doesn't miss the opportunity to say "I told you so." Meanwhile, word is the UDP is coming up with a No Child Left Behind clone. Left behind whom? Where are these public school children who are ahead?

As with the U.S. Democratic Party, PUP is the party of immigrants, and presently that party is rushing to naturalize as many Latin migrants as possible so they can vote PUP. Among the shit storm of problems involved here is that the HIV rate is high among these immigrants, many of whom are single young men of migrant labor. They constitute an increasing strain on the nation's rickety health care system, which is fighting, rather successfully so far, to stave off a full blown epidemic. Many also feel the immigrants take away too many Belizean jobs. Moreover, immigration issues stew the same as in America, and like America, it's politics as usual, but with a few different twists.

One twist is that Belize has some fighting, if partisan, newspapers such as America or Great Britain has not seen in at least 60 years, if then. The newspapers, however partisan, are loaded with the voices of common citizens, not made up of quotes from powerful officialdom like U.S. papers. Whatever can be said about the lack of libel laws here, it enables citizens to name the bastards out loud. And they do. Sadly though, little comes of it unless some big dog in the government wants it to. But the bastards have not yet worn all of the people down.

Whoa hoss, this just in! Marie's shot at that \$250 just got better. Hugo Chavez has dumped \$10 million into the PUP government, ostensibly for development, but much of which is being passed out to voters as I write this. That's a lotta lunch money and water bills. When choosing between such political bullies, best to go with the one who gives you lunch money instead of beating you up and taking it. Go Hugo!

Not being the majority party at the moment, the UDP cannot get its hands into the coffers deep enough to spread around the geet even if it wanted to (nor is

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Uncle Hugo likely to open his wallet for them in an act of solidarity with their hard-line capitalism). Which makes them somewhat less corrupt for the moment than PUP. This makes some poor voters see them as being more honest. Many poor people vote the same way working class Americans vote Republican, and see the UDP as a force for stability, evidently, like their North American counterparts, mistaking meanness and transference of wealth for stability. The bad news here is that much of the fiscal talent and administrative skill rests in the UDP, a party in which, in violation of Belizean law, every elected member flat out refuses to declare his or her assets and business connections and gets away with it – now that's solidarity.)

In any case, the UDP is counting on high-powered U.S. style media paid for by the Bush administration to do the job on February 7. All TV and radio are owned by the parties or party interests, and while biased, between the two camps you get the real dirt on everybody if you can sift it. Nearly all electronic media here is owned by the parties or their associate interests. Thus the UDP's Channel 7 mouthpiece has been showing news footage of voters lined up at PUP representative's offices to get their vote money. Strangely, they do not show the nationwide burst of road improvements, free televisions, deeds and even a few trucks that get distributed. In all likelihood, if they showed the free refrigerators, the PUP lines would stretch from here to the Mexican border.

The news footage of the vote bribe lines flickers on the TV screen at Kibby's Cool Spot (taverns are "cool spots" here) where I am sucking down Beliken Stout with a small group of older Garifuna plus a few mixed race Creoles and Mayans – Belizeans all. Some for damned sure are paying for drinks with vote money, given that they said so. Yet they are incensed at the vote bribery the lines shown on the screen. The Belizean TV anchor person looks piously concerned as she delivers her script. Now call it a cultural bias if you want, but I have a hard time taking seriously black women with brightly bleached and straightened blonde hair cut like Katie Couric and wearing heels in these soft sandy palmetto scrub lands. But it seems to work for Belizeans. Anyway, the drinkers are indignant about the news of such widespread vote bribery. Am I missing something here?

"Huh? You sell your votes, right?" I ask.

"Jah."

Then why is it so bad they do?"

They just laugh knowingly.

"So are you going to vote PUP?"

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“Jah.”

“Why?”

“Because dey paid de moneh for my vote.”

Thus followed an absolutely serious discussion regarding how it is every person’s patriotic obligation to vote, for the sake of the nation and our village. “In wi hans de fuchah.” Something like that. Caribbean and Creole syntax comes hard for me. Do these people know something I don’t know? Do they care to know anything at all, at least in the way I think I know things? Obviously not.

Outside the open doorway of Kibby’s, silhouetted against the glaring subtropical light, three Garifuna girls float by, tall and crane-like, a mirage of brilliant headscarves and parasols, all Giachometti elbows and necks, seemingly without feet. They nod and bob, as if in suspension over the deep purple black spots that are their noon shadows. The oldest cannot be more than 18, and already they are as inscrutably African as the Mother Continent herself.

From Malcolm X to MasterCard

Looking back on earlier visits to Belize, I think it’s safe to say there was a time here when a common man’s vote directly affected national policy, what there was of it, and directed the nation’s finances, what little there were. Perhaps in America, too. Almost nobody believes that today. Not in Belize or America. Oh sure, “national progress” has been made here, roads are sort of better, folks are healthier, there are more “jobs.” The people are swimming in knockoff symbols of affluence, Chinese made duds, styrene plastic washing machines that fly apart after a couple of months, crappy cell phones that sort of work and. In fact, for most Belizean citizens, everything is “sort of.” There is a sort of middle class emerging, based mostly on the Chinese bling and sort of usurious home loans. But the majority of citizens are poorer today in real quality-of-life terms. Most of the housing stock, especially in Belize City, consists of the rotting structures of the British slave era. Bank credit cards, hawked night and day in the media, are causing people to lose the free land granted to them as citizens of Belize – particularly if it has beachfront. The kids are getting dumber, quick payday loan offices are springing up everywhere, and even with gas now at \$12 a gallon, more people are driving. We are all Americans now.

In Belize or in the U.S., the business of local and state politics is the business of turning virgins into whores. The business of national politics is polishing up whores to look like virgins. Of course some whores are nicer than others, but in the high stakes back room poker game of power politics one does not get to play

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by being nice. One comes to the table with a lot of dough, a good cover story and a knife stashed in the boot. And even if you win, the really big guys running the game still own the country where it is being played. In Belize it's the shadow governments such as land development, tourism and drug trafficking. In the U.S. it's the financial corporations, Big Pharma, the war making industries, energy companies, etc, who don't even have to do the shadow government act; they run the joint openly and if you don't like it and refuse to pay taxes to support them, well, they are in the privatized prison business too, buddy! Hence, while a guy like Obama, who presumably does not take corporate campaign dough, may win, you'll never hear him call for the complete dismantling of the rapacious big health care or financial corporations, or big media corporations who own our consciousness and awareness of our nation and the world, and upon which he must ultimately depend to gain access to the public at all. In America every player has some smaller player by the balls under the table. In Belize they just divvy the money up without even dealing the cards.

*"In America, there is food to eat,
No more runnin' through the jungle scuffin' up your feet ...
- Randy Newman, Sail Away*

Belizeans love the hell out of Obama, mostly because he is black, or somewhat so. When I remind them that nearly all their own politicians are black, they are not impressed. Poor Belizeans follow the U.S. presidential race more as entertainment than anything else. And so as long as Obama can buy TV ads and deliver greeting card platitudes that have a sort of righteous sound, he has entertainment, emotional and dramatic value here, as well as to liberal couch taters up there in the Nembutal Republic. As for Hillary, entertaining she ain't. ("A hard an' sour wooman," agree the Kibby's drinkers, "like de green orange.") Frankly, I'd like to see Clinton wear Lewinsky's blue dress on American Idol and sing "A Man Ain't Nothin' But A Man" as a campaign ad, or maybe deliver Lady Macbeth's "Out damned spot!" lines in an episode of American Housewives. But I suppose that's asking too much, even from the rancid freak show of American politics.

As Lady Macbeth quipped, "Hell is a murky place." Politics is even more so. The capability for any president to make big progressive changes has become nil in the U.S., and maybe here too, although the capability to fuck things up

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remains boundless — to wit, Sparky the Chimp. If all of the U.S. Congress cannot effect change because they are owned men, no candidate sucking down corn soup on the Iowa campaign trail is gonna do it, either. And besides, America is dead broke and in hock up to her eyeballs. Even little changes in America country cost big money because there must be big profit in it for Big Corp or big dough to slosh around inside the gullet of big government bureaucracy. For instance, a Katrina victim reader of mine, who happens to be a cost accountant, tells me that it cost the U.S. government \$38,000 NOT to get his family into one of those emergency FEMA trailer homes, hundreds of which are still sitting in storage areas unoccupied. He moved to Panama and swears the quality of life there is much cheaper and far better, and that despite inefficiencies and fixes, it is more bearable. Which is rather the way I feel about this tiny country.

I dunno. Come November '08, assuming I can find the stomach for it, I will vote. My choices are not even as good as in Belize, where the candidates are flesh and blood people, not holographic media illusions. In November I can cast a vote for the manufactured candidate of my manufactured choice, vote Democratic as they vote PUP, on the grounds that at least some of the national swag will land in poor people's laps, after it passes through the innards of bureaucratic waste, the fraud of government contractors and privatization. I can write-in vote my conscience as I have traditionally done, which would necessarily mean Kucinich. That's assuming I don't get cut from the voter list through fraudulent voter caging tactics (not too likely, since I am white and few felons are likely to be named Bageant). I'll be punching a touch screen voting machine with no accountability because no recount is possible. And my vote will legally be reduced a set of digits that instantly become the undisclosed intellectual property of Diebold.

Neither a Ron Paul, nor a McCain nor a Huckabee nor Obama or anybody else going to blow the trumpet and have the walls of Jericho's corporate gulag/surveillance state fall down. They'll fall down as the walls of empires always do, when the rot inside them becomes too great, when it is stretched too thin and runs its course. Until then, if a single righteous candidate ever does make it through the bullshit to get close enough to throw a Molotov cocktail over the walls of power, I'll light the goddamned wick. But maybe it's the subtropical heat. Maybe it's the distance from the fray. But right now, when it comes to voting, I'd take five hundred for my vote and head back to Kibby's Cool Spot.

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