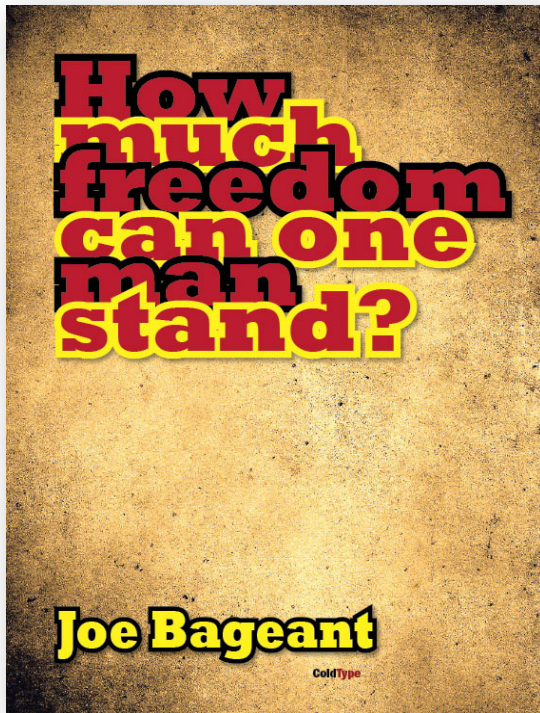


**How
much
freedom
can one
man
stand?**

Joe Bageant

ColdType



THE AUTHOR

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ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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How much freedom can one man stand?

Freedom comes in many forms in America, and new forms are constantly being created. The latest has been freedom from basic financial security. The weakened economy has given corporatists an excuse to, as they say, “let workers go.” Which sounds as if companies are granting employees some sort of freedom: “Go on George, twenty years on the job is long enough, so git outta here. Have yourself a ball!”

By that measure, there have never been a more free people. Now benevolently relieved of their job responsibilities, millions are free to do almost anything they choose, go fishing ... or take up the banjo ... At the moment 14 million Americans have been granted freedom, with another three or four million expected to be pardoned before the economy “levels out,” meaning more people will lose their jobs, but at a slower rate. Of those 14 million liberated souls, six million are so free they can even take the family on a year-long round the world trip, if they so

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choose. They need no longer report in at the (un)employment office because their benefits have expired. One little suggestion for their trip abroad: visit the guy in Asia who now has your job. With a little effort, I’m sure you can get over the barbed wire topped steel mesh fence enclosing the factory’s “attached employee housing compound” in Sichuan Province

But luckiest of all are those American workers who get to have their cake and eat it too. According to the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, an additional three million adults over age 25 have both jobs and unprecedented leisure time. These are the working Americans living on “unintentional part time employment.” This term carries overtones of some sort of accidental consequence of something the worker did. As in: “Oops, silly me! I didn’t realize that I cannot support a family on 17 hours work and \$120 a week. So now I must spend all my newfound leisure time seeking more ‘unintentional underemployment.’ ” One must admire govern-

ment speak for its subtlety. Intentional or not, these working folks are experiencing unprecedented new leisure time opportunities as Americans. Whoopee! Sleep in four mornings a week!

Depending on how you look at it, the American people are either freer, or simply getting better at what we have always represented to the world – a bunch of powerless and unquestioning mental midgets. My money is on the latter.

Midgets can seldom see over the fence. Consequently, we see the world from inside the fence and on such small terms as paychecks and families, and no farther. We cannot identify even with a national-level struggle for the same things we want, much less the global one for human dignity and fairness in labor. Exclusive devotion to family is the chief virtue here, along with maniacal devotion to the closest football franchise. Moreover it's the only responsibility a man has, the sign of a good man, a real man. Accepting "personal responsibility" for the credit card bills. That one's personal responsibility might also extend to the larger world is incomprehensible. Meanwhile union workers at downsized Sony and 3M plants in France hold CEOs hostage and threaten to burn down the factories, resulting in larger severance packages and raises for those not made redundant. That's the downside of mental midgetism, every fence is a tall fence. Knowing stuff is too much work. Then too, the fence was made quite a bit taller by the American media blackout of the French union action. I mean hell J.T., those unions are communist!

My friends abroad tell me it is pitiful to watch such unquestioning bovine Americans. I tell them it isn't much fun to watch from the inside either. Swamped in the manufactured spectacle, fear and



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distractions we call American culture, few among us notice what our nation has become – a slickly packaged totalistic and authoritarian state of type new to history. That there has been any loss of self agency among the people is incomprehensible. Two subsequent generations to mine have never known what life once was in America. While not perfect, it was not so thoroughly policed and minutely administrated. For most now, present conditions are like the atmosphere or the weather. Just there. Just the way it is. The conditioning of adolescents makes me want to cry. Passing through school metal detectors are a part of life. Being subjected to a piss test to join the chess club, or sniffed by a German shepherd police dog while being lined up against the lockers along with the rest of the student body? Paramilitary terrorist drills in high schools and middle schools? A kid being led out of study hall in handcuffs? Don't even think twice about it. It's just the way it is. And, if I may ask, exactly what is it? Well, one New York state school board calls it "Parental freedom from fear." The Columbine shootings provided the excuse to embed these things into society. Nine eleven provided the authority to implement them anywhere and everywhere. So now it's just the way it is.

Given the nature of most of my writing and public speaking, I am more or less in the business of questioning authority in my own country, however modestly or meekly that may prove to be in the end. Yet, how individual Americans come to genuinely question authority on their own – and a few millions of us do, or you would not be reading this – remains a mystery to me. Apparently, each one arrives there by a different personal route. (Well, duh!) Just as I did.

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But when we arrive, despite that there are many others like us, we find ourselves in relative isolation, even on the Internet which is supposed to be our great gathering ground. That there are over 140 million separated, self-focused blogs just may have something to do with it. Dispersed so thinly over this nation of 300 million, our voices are scarcely heard, except between one another and then mostly in atomized groups dealing with one issue. There are the annual conferences of lefty bloggers, where everyone gets deliriously charged up at the sight of so many fellow political consciousness mutants, other people who get the picture. After that everyone returns to sculpting their indignant prose on company time, until the next big cyber-leftie shebang. Sometimes we see one of our Internet tribe acknowledged in the mainstream media as experts – but only those who are so damned non-threatening middle-of-the-road safe and affluent as to be irrelevant. Arianna Huffington and Jane Hamsher spring to mind. Though Big Brother may well be watching, he ain't watching to see what Arianna is wearing.

Meanwhile, the capability of corpo-government entities to manage citizen behavior through technology, especially media technology, is greater than ever. Researchers study and government contracted companies manage what are known as “screen behaviors” toward what can only be called social control purposes. Just what are screen behaviors and how are they managed? To be frank, I can only verify one screen behavior from personal experience, and that one has to do with porn. It's hard to imagine a more interactive screen experience than that, yet they evidently exist. In any case, media technology, screen behavior, “online recreational outlets,” video war gaming,



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they all have a chilling ring of social conditioning about them.

In a thoroughly conditioned and well managed capitalist consumer society the masses pay money to have their consciousness modified toward the economic ends of their elite managers. Take for instance, the wildly popular modern warfare video game, a murder simulator named “Call of Duty,” a kill everything in sight game for the development of this Empire’s military forces. The game reaches so deeply into the psyche that even clergymen find themselves in it. Brooklyn Rabbi Micah Kelber, wrote in the Jewish Daily Forward, “As a Jew” the video game allows you to experience the closest thing possible to killing the sense of victimhood created by the Holocaust. ... In fact, it’s so satisfying that when you get to shoot down the golden eagle on the Reichstag, while sniping headshots at flame-throwing Nazis, you simply don’t want the war to end.” The newest version features a Brit SAS commando and a U.S. Marine taking down enemies in both Russia and the Middle East. Shades of things to come? There is no government plot here. We simply carry our own hide to the tanner because we have been well conditioned to do so.

The U.S. Army uses hi tech video games in its shopping mall recruitment centers. No one seems to find these “US Army Experience Centers” a bit strange, although in one instance at Philadelphia’s Franklin Mall there was protest. If you can call it that. A group of masked protestors delivered a “symbolic complaint,” in a brief and scripted “protest rally.” They pre-designated a few persons among them to be arrested (for refusal to disperse). Delivering the arrestees to the police upon arrival, everybody then quietly left the mall. “It was a symbolic

action,” explained one of the protesters, who added, “Oh god, I’m not supposed to speak without permission of the group!” Protest in America sure ain’t what it used to be. We used to burn shit down and fight back all the way to the paddy wagon..

The nature and purpose of any government is to control behavior, either for good or ill. Social management of some sort is necessary for peace, order and the general welfare. As a society becomes more complex, governments necessarily exert increasing control until they eventually reach authoritarianism. I did not conclude this. Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin did, except they called it tyranny. Same difference.

Flawed as history reveals those two founders to be, they nevertheless had time to think and then write about what they thought. Likewise their citizen constituency had time to consider what they wrote and how it related to themselves as individuals in a political and economic environment. Entirely unassisted by screen behavior, they concluded, that individual liberty was indeed a human right and checks and balances looked to be the best way of preserving that right.

Mother England may have birthed yeoman liberty centuries before 1776, but that geezer Ben, who spent as much time with his pants down as up, and Tom Jeff, who jollied it up with his black mistress even as he wrote laws that preserved black slavery, well, they were nevertheless onto something with this checks and balances thing. And the more citizens thought about it, the more they liked it. We’ve all been beneficiaries of the time they had to consider their political environment, then take right action during what we now consider simpler, less daunting times. But no times are simple



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to those living in them. Consider a bunch of farmers who bathed once a week or the yokel village shopkeepers – who could well go bankrupt if they burned too many candles in a winter season – taking on mighty England in warfare. I’ve read their musings and believe me, theirs was focused a focused and meditated decision.

But as American culture and society became more complex with more moving parts, it became more distracting. Decades ago we reached the point where the level of distraction was so high that few were capable of navigating it with enough individual consciousness intact to reflect upon, much less question the nature of our national environment. Like the rest of the planet, Americans mostly respond to the world as it is presented to them each day. But the world as it is understood by Americans now comes through many layers of distorted filters, most of them purposefully distorted for economic financial gain by one overarching entity or another. So much so as to be atomized, kaleidoscopically diffracted. One cannot identify even the simplest object through a kaleidoscope. Bedazzled, disoriented and detached from reality, we are rendered effectively blind – thus easily directed and managed. So we listen to the few loud voices to the many and disregard any dissent as background noise.

In fact, as the material, social and political complexities increased beyond our available time and ability to think about, or study and comprehend the larger order of things, we came to desire ever increasing control. The emerging authoritarian one-voice-to-the-many neatly solved this problem by answering the important question of our time: “Is anybody in charge here, for chrissake! I’m finding

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meth vials in my yard, homeless people are coming to my door asking for food or work, a friggin street gang just rented the house next door, and I can't get a customer service operator who speaks English. Who's in charge here?"

The one voice of government, answers, "I AM."

"Good then! Do what you gotta do. Make my decision for me. Because I haven't the slightest friggin idea of what's going on."

And decide it does. Just last month the government, by way of the highest court in the land, made a vitally important decision on behalf of the people of the United States. The Supreme Court ruled that public school officials cannot search the pubescent panties of a 13-year-old girl, on suspicion that she is in possession of Advil for menstrual cramps. (Sanford Unified School District vs. Savana Redding – Case 08-479). Redding, an eighth grade honor student when the case began in 2001, was almost out of college when it was finally settled. It took six years and Christ only knows how much in legal costs to make this profound decision. The decision was hailed by progres-



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sives as "a landmark victory for personal freedom." One more new freedom for Americans. The right to stash an over-the-counter pill anywhere on your body you choose.

We find ourselves awash in new freedoms. There are those aforementioned 17 million folks freed from work. And at least 45 million people are free from the onus of healthcare and all those time consuming trips to the doctor or dentist. More than 60 million folks are freed from the rigors of financial planning because they now have zero net worth, thanks to the mortgage bust. More than a million are free from even having to decide when to eat, shower, take a crap or sleep – because they are in the joint doing time, mostly for parole violations of some previous offense.

I've been around 62 years and I'm here to tell you that I've never seen such a deluge of freedom in my entire life. That's the foot stompin' truth. And I don't doubt for one minute that there aren't more freedoms coming down the pike. I can feel 'em in these old bones. I just might need a bump of Old Granddad to brace myself for the next one. Lordy, lordy, I just might.

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