

DRINK,

PRAY,

FUCK,

FIGHT

**HOW THE
SCOTS-IRISH
SCREWED UP
AMERICA**

JOE BAGEANT

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ou may not meet them among your circle of friends, but there are millions of Americans who fiercely believe we should nuke North Korea and Iran, seize the Middle East's oil, and replace the U.S. Constitution with the Christian Bible. They believe the United States will conquer the entire world and convert it to our notions of democracy and fundamentalist Christian religion. And that will happen says my Christian neo-conservative friend Dave Henderson says, "when we elect a man with the balls to use our nukes." You may not believe me, and if you don't I cannot blame you for never having been exposed to such folks. Only an idiot or a masochistic observer of the American scene would subject himself or herself to these Americans. I like to think I am the latter, but the jury is still out.

In understanding how such ominous political ideations manifested themselves in this country, it helps to look back 450 years to a group of Celtic cattle thieves killing one another in the mud along Hadrian's Wall—the Borderers. Fanatically religious and war loving, these Scottish Protestants made their way first to Ireland as the "Ulster Scots," then to

JOE BAGEANT / DRINK, PRAY, FUCK, FIGHT

American shores during the early 18th century. Known to most Americans as the Scots Irish or Scotch Irish, the Borderers brought cultural values that govern (some would say screw up) the political emotions of millions of Americans to this day.

Nearly a third of Americans have Borderer ancestors, though they know little about them, if they know anything at all. Even informed people generally know zilch about the influence this culture continues to exert on America, although that may be about to change somewhat with the current spate of hagiographic Scots Irish books. One is James Webb's *Born Fighting*, wherein all that is good in America is attributed to Scots Irish willingness to make war. This is quite in tandem with our self-justifying national storyline. Americans have always described themselves in Borderer terms and values, such as "fierce, liberty loving," "individualistic," "freely religious," and "fighting to defend our way of life." With the neo-conservative takeover of American politics, this has intensified, and we see a supercharging of these themes in the forms of fanatical religiosity, hatred of government, bellicose piety, and in a new twist, the technological fist of Jesus smiting the swarthy godless heathen in the name of a crude-oil-stained flag.

The homeland of the original Borderers was a squalid place. Denuded of forests and incapable of growing enough food to support its inhabitants, much less produce enough to sell within the traditional English culture of commerce, the natives survived by and gloried in "reiving," (cattle rustling.) It was a land of alternating famine and overpopulation, the only constant being warfare between England and Scotland along the fluctuating border. Rooted in centuries of national fighting—and in those rare times of peace, inter-clan warfare among themselves—they maintained their fierce ways, clan loyalties and holdings. The right to hold any turf they occupied was determined by their ability to defend it. Holding such miserable land was a worthwhile effort mainly in as far as it created clan proximity so it could be held. It was a vicious, near point-less circle. Given the unceasing looting, burning and moving, the Borderers built impermanent earth and log dwellings called "cabbins." Within their smoky cabins they lived a quick-tempered, hard drinking, volatile lifestyle, one that anthropologists say can still be seen in American trailer courts today. So the next time you see one of us drunkenly kicking in a neighbor's car door in some trailer court parking lot at 1 AM, try to remember: That's not a brawl you're witnessing, it's cultural diversity.

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More importantly however, in the off time between fighting, the Borderers embraced the most fanatical form of Calvinism—embraced it so thoroughly they almost hugged it to death. In justifiable reaction to the corrupt Catholic Church of their times, the Johns, Knox and Calvin, established the democratic from-the-bottom-up Kirk organization of the Presbyterian Church, with Jesus Christ himself as the church’s only primate. After failing in efforts to make Scotland’s government a theocracy, Presbyterian Scots settled for the next worst thing—putting Christ as the arbiter of all civil government. Ever haters of earthly authority, they deemed that any civil government was only as legitimate as the degree to which it was Biblical, and reserved the right to resist it on those grounds. (By now you must be smelling a theme here for christsake! I’m trying to. Work with me people!) As theological ideas go, John Calvin had slammed one out of the park. Halfway around the world and across four centuries, he is the undisputed father of American Christian fundamentalism, which still clings to those same conclusions about government. His American Borderer descendants are busily dismantling the mainspring of their hated government, the U.S. Constitution, and for the last thirty years “dominionist” fundamentalists have worked politically to replace it with Biblical Law according to their own interpretation. Calvin would jump out of that grave and demand a high five if he knew what his movement has accomplished in the world’s most powerful empire.

Looking back, it is hard to believe such a motley swarm of border Celts as arrived in America could accomplish all that. They certainly appeared unlikely candidates when they began migrating here during the first 75 years of the 18th century. So unsavory were their habits that even fellow Calvinists, the New England Puritans, did not much accept them. The East Anglian followers of Cotton Mather’s brand of Calvinism were less than enamored with the Borderer practice of drinking in church and their low hygienic standards. Eventually the Borderers found themselves once more (where else?) on another border. This time it was the border of civilization, the frontiers of British North American holdings in Pennsylvania. True to form, they were exactly where they were not supposed to be—tilling soil and killing Indians west of the Allegheny Mountains against King George II’s prohibition.

In the long run however, these unwashed, hard-fighting fanatics turned out to

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be useful to the aristocracy in developing their vast land grants in the colonies. For example, from the 1730s onward, the Virginia elite sought to populate the Blue Ridge Mountains as a barrier between the Indians and their lowland slave plantations, and make fortunes selling the Blue Ridge and the Shenandoah Valley to those willing to settle there. Thus, elites such as Thomas Lord Fairfax, the Byrd and the Beverly families brought in Borderers, along with sturdy Pennsylvania Germans. The Borderers were more than willing to keep the Indians, and later the French, killed back to some appropriate line along the Alleghenies and Virginia's leading families indeed made fortunes that stand today from the land sales, particularly from the Germans. The Borderers often squatted as on almost as much as they purchased or shot at rent collectors. But so long as Borderers could pour powder and buy rum, their villages and cabin-steads were considered a reasonable success. Sort of. The young officer George Washington, while building Winchester's French and Indian War frontier defenses at Fort Loudoun, called our town one of the most the most ignorant, mean spirited and predatory places in all the colonies, a tradition we have thus far managed to maintain. That did not keep Washington from marching said uncouth souls—my ancestors among them—into the Alleghenies to “take a pull” as an early account puts it, at the menacing French and the murderous feathered heathen. Not too many years later when the elitist, land speculating Washington entered politics, he had barrels of rum rolled out on our main street and the same mean spirited Winchesterians elected him to his first public office, the Virginia House of Burgesses. Which goes to show that no political idea or personage is so unpalatable to us it cannot be washed down with a drink, or otherwise made acceptable through God rhetoric or patriotic bloody shirt waving. It still works. Repeated showings of Twin Towers footage and beheadings via streaming Internet are the kind of bloody shirt an America steeped in Borderer culture can grasp. To hell with explanations about oil and global resentment of U.S. imperialism.

Ever hateful of authority and government, we working class products of Borderer values have remained useful to the rich and the politically ambitious in the ensuing 260 years, including many of the same elite families, the Byrds, Lees, Carters, Glasses, etc. During the Civil War, although too poor to piss straight, we nevertheless died to protect slavery on behalf of the elite (40% of all wealth in the South was in the form of slaves held by the elite.) Later during the Jim Crow era we Virginia Borderers were indispensable to the Harry Flood

JOE BAGEANT / DRINK, PRAY, FUCK, FIGHT

Byrd political machine in helping “keep the niggers down,” as they used to say. We shut down the state’s public schools and sent our kids to school in the church basements during Byrd’s “massive resistance” campaign. And to this day we can be counted upon for bellicose objection to such government oppression as health care for the poor, equitable taxation on the rich, fair labor practices, seatbelts, environmental laws, and stopping stateline gun sales to out-of-state urban criminals.

But a good blood-rousing war is where we truly shine, and where God, glory and mayhem really come together. I currently receive emails from Iraq, compliments of a born-again coworker, which I in turn forward to progressive friends in liberal cites—who promptly write them off as the screed of religious nutjobs. Which they are. But that doesn’t take into account that there are millions of said nutjobs who exercise their right to vote. Here is one from a U.S. government sponsored “imbedded reporter,” writing for the church newsletter of an Arlington Virginia Assembly of God congregation. He is a smalltime bakery shop owner deemed a news reporter by the administration, one of many rabid evangelists sent to Iraq along with legitimate journalists:

Blessings from the land of Babylon!

I just want to praise GOD for when I am weak HE is strong. LORD I know not what to do but my eyes are on YOU, JESUS. So much to talk about and I do not know where to start...It makes me so angry that these quiet warriors receive no appreciation from the media and a lot of other people in our nation for the sacrifices they make. They are truly ‘a genuine blessing to this nation as every other soldier before them has been.’... It is criminal of those parrots of the media back home who stand with their lie for political gain and who profit from the blood and pain of our fallen soldiers. This nation need unite. The media is a pack of lying, deceiving whores who will go to any length to defeat George Bush and the righteousness of this cause to set these helpless people free from antichrist spirit through Saddam and his wicked sons, Uday and Usay... All of those who had recently lost their comrades said “We have a job to do and that is a risk of the job. These people need us here and we can not leave until the job is done.” ... I am fighting back tears as I think of them right now. Oops I lost the fight, I need to wipe my eyes. It is criminal the pressure that the media puts on these soldiers and their families

JOE BAGEANT / DRINK, PRAY, FUCK, FIGHT

to try to defeat George Bush and get their wicked agenda through. There are two lords, we follow one or the other. There is JESUS or there is the devil. The media follows the devil and perpetrates his wicked lies upon this nation to the destruction and endless pain of so many. Stand up against the aimless babbling of those whose father is the father of lies, Satan. Call those liberal lying rags like the Washington Post, L.A. Times, N.Y. Times, CBS and the CNN [communist news network] and voice your disapproval of their lying. ... I say stand and deliver in the name of JESUS... Decide today where you stand for the LORD is coming soon and we will all be held accountable for "who we been hangin with". The LORD said 'be away from me for I never knew you. As the song goes 'do you know JESUS and does HE know you.

GOD BLESS

Michael

And they say we do not engage in holy wars.

The American Borderer take on the world is that it was always a tough place and is getting tougher. Which is a damned hard to argue with and few of us would. But after that, the American penchant for emotionalism and simplistic solutions kicks in. I myself nearly succumb to it at times, the most recent being this morning after viewing the videotaped beheading of Eugene Armstrong in Iraq. It was done slowly over minutes in sawing motions. Belief in a universal humanist socialism is the only thing that gets me through days such as this, and then but barely at times. Then I remember that the beheading was a political media event calculated to serve all sides in the struggle for the world's worst emotions. It serves one side as proof of the power to avenge American imperialist policy and invasion. It serves the other as proof of Muslim savagery, providing another bloody shirt for the American public. But ultimately it serves to elevate raw emotionalism above thoughtfulness, which is always a good thing for extremists, whether they be radical jihadists or a militant U.S. capitalist junta. By the end of the day I am usually back to the realization that global starvation killed far more people this day than the de jour bombing or fighting in the Middle East. Starvation just doesn't pull the kind of audience ratings a behead-

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ing does, does not sell as much advertising for news shows. It does not satisfy an unspoken global energy policy and it does not fulfill a national religious mass psychosis regarding good and evil. Most of all, mercy is not profitable. If it were, we would be seeing more close-ups of children with sunken fly-covered eyes. But the fundamentalist working man in the taverns and the churches, the in-the-dirt ignorant one steeped in the American Borderer ethos, cares about none of the above. (The reader may call me arrogant for saying what I know is true. But I've been there and still live there...so ask me if I give a damned.) For him, it comes down to this: Drink, pray, fight and fuck. Kill the bad guys. Life ain't really that complicated. Get over it folks.

So here we are, the Borderer people who "shaped America," as the history books like to say. Today we can be found everywhere in America. Although most of the early Borderer immigration took place in Pennsylvania, from there they spread north and south, and later west, and assimilated into the cultures they found. Those that went south identified with the South during the Civil War. Those that went north identified with the North, and so on, as they spread their strain throughout the entire nation. And what a strain! Every damned one of them part wampus cat, "part Cherokee," meaner than a wad of snakes on a griddle, ever malleable by the swells, and more than happy to give any deserving Muslim a .45 caliber ticket to paradise. Ready to ship out for the next holy war on any shore that flies a heathen flag. To our minds, what could possibly be wrong with making the world heel to an empire piloted by Calvin's ghost and anointed by God? Love us or hate us, we are nevertheless the same touching, pathos ridden, stubborn, God-obsessed folks who gave you Johnny Cash, Andrew Jackson, Ma Barker, Ronald Reagan, Mark Twain, country music, NAASCAR, Edgar Allen Poe, John Hancock and Bill Clinton.

As I write, I am monitoring a local online discussion between two old friends. One is a newsvendor and the other is a factory worker. It runs like this:

Lets take a couple of camel jockeys and crucify them on TV down on the Mall in DC.

Hell yes! If the Muslims can behead our guys, then we Christians can crucify theirs!

"ALLLLLLL RIGHT!"

This may be a digital age, and that conversation may be in cyberspace, but if

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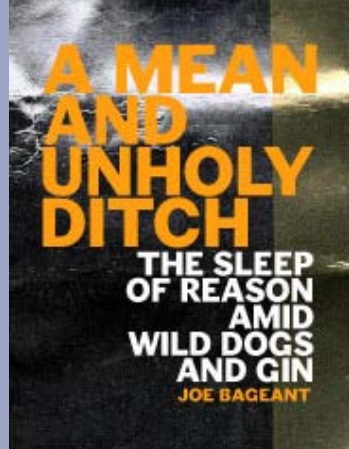
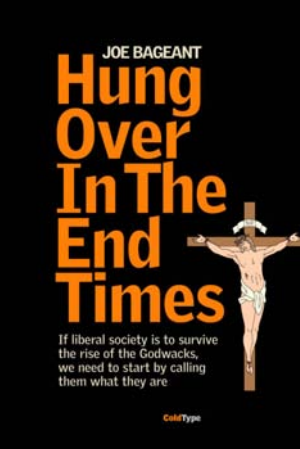
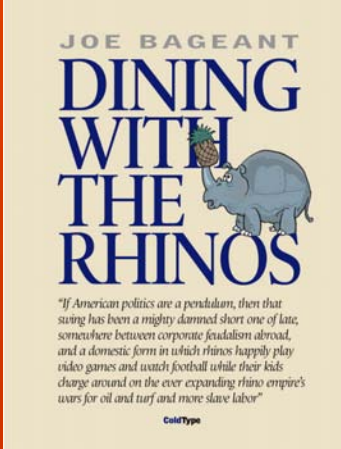
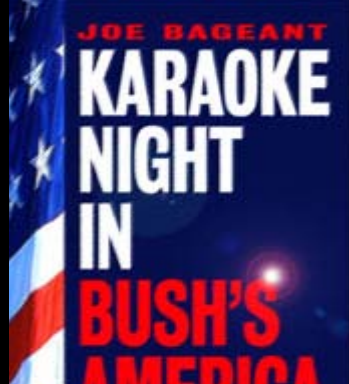
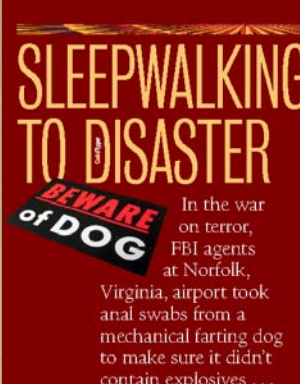
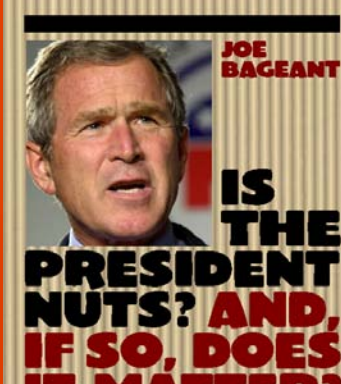
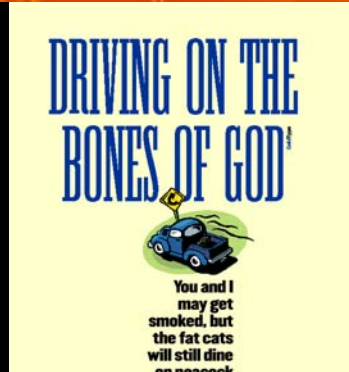
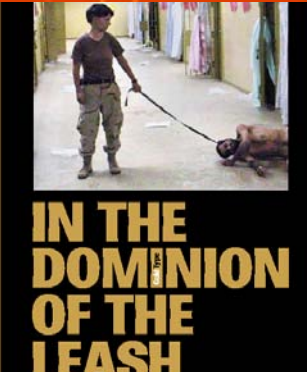
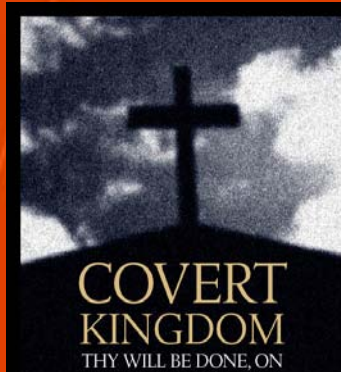
I close my eyes I can almost smell the peat fires and hear the rasp of claymores slipping their sheathes at Bannockburn.

I gotta tell you one last Scots Irish anecdote because, well hell, I don't know how to get out of this thing. Hereabouts in the Blue Ridge we still have plenty of full strength Scots Irish, what the sociologists and historians call "vestigial cultures." Meaning tough-assed little inbreds of the old mold. So anyway, out on the loading dock at the local Rubbermaid plant forklift driver Jodie Macauley, a skinny twitchy middle aged redneck, failed to show up for a couple of days. When he returned to work, he explained to the dock foreman that he'd been in jail. "Whatta hell for?" asked the foreman. "Waall, these two tractor-trailer trucks hemmed me in on the road. So I pulled my pistol and shot out the radiator of the truck behind me. But, please don't tell nobody here sir, because these days there is some people who think doing that kinda thang is weird."

Yeah. Right.

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