



**Joe Bageant**

ColdType



**Joe Bageant**

© Joe Bageant 2005

**ColdType**

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD  
[www.coldtype.net](http://www.coldtype.net)

## Joe Bageant / Free People Do Bad Things

# A while back

there was a wrestling promotion campaign in which young children were encouraged to attend local wrestling bringing weapons of their own creation that would later be used in the ring. One small boy returned with a baseball bat wrapped in barbed wire. Asked about the wisdom of encouraging the child to create such brutal weapons, the kid's father was dumbfounded: "This is just entertainment! It's fun!" World champion Wrestling's Vince McMahon's indignant response to critics was, "This is still a free country. I will not let anyone stop me." The implication was, of course, "I am a great defender of freedom against evil liberal regulation." Then he looked into the camera to his fans and said: "DON'T LET ANYONE STOP YOU!"

Well, kick my ass and call me Henry! Spare us all from liberal sissies unable to see the good clean family fun in clubbing folks bloody with barbed wire-wrapped baseball bats. About the only consolation here is that, were Vince McMahon to be pulverized by the very same bat on TV, the same people whose basest instincts he exploits for profit would LOVE IT. Hell, I'd love it. At any rate, McMahon is an example of true, unregulated "freedom-in-business." And to think that we once

## Joe Bageant / Free People Do Bad Things

thought football was about as bad as America's bread and circuses would get.

Why does it feel as if Vince McMahon, football, the NRA, Wall Street, Republicans and America's far-flung network of secret prisons and expanding desert wars all have something in common? Why this unnamable suspicion in the back of the mind, the darting sense of fear? Ah yes! Something is happening here, and we all know what it is, don't we Mr. Joooooones! Things are bound to get more ugly.

For now, though, our attention is absorbed in the efforts of our armed and clueless youth who, like unsophisticated pit bulls, have been turned loose on the rest of world. About 1,500 of them have been killed, but not before killing a hundred thousand or so Iraqis, nearly all of them civilians. The carnage, looting and general lawlessness in Iraq is not a problem. "Free people do bad things," said Donald Rumsfeld. But at least we are returning to our violent roots. As any indigenous person will tell you, we are coming home to the values that made America great. Abu Ghraib was a fresh start at reestablishing our violent national heritage that began with Indian slaughter and seemed to stall out a bit after Vietnam. But we're baaaaaack! And we're as bad-assed as ever.

Presiding over all at this critical but vulgar time in our history is, rather appropriately, a vulgar idiot whose second bogus inaugural was hosted by Trent Lott, a deliberate "fuck you" precisely equivalent to those Mississippi men groping themselves for the cameras of Life magazine back in the 1960s. Our esteemed president IS one of those men. Things smell more ominous by the day, and to quote the late Dr. Thompson, "Big darkness, soon come." Feels like it's already here. Hunter also said "a man with a greed for the truth should expect no mercy and give none." Damned good advice, I would say. Because from this desk at the edge of Washington D.C., it looks like we are not about to get any at all. (Bear with me; there is a theme in here somewhere. I promise to find it.)

Speaking of bringing up America's brutal Reich tykes, there is Scott Heldreth of Pinellas Park, Florida who is grooming his 10-year-old son Joshua to do jail time. Josh is one of six children – ages 10 to 14 – arrested for crossing a police line at the Woodside Hospice to take water to Terri Schiavo. Josh pestered his dad (himself arrested many times at abortion clinics) to drive him there from Kannapolis, N.C., so he could be arrested at the Schiavo circus. Meanwhile, other children stood by

## Joe Bageant / Free People Do Bad Things

with duct-taped mouths labeled "JAIL" in black magic marker.

God told Josh to do it. "My wife and I felt like God really put it on his heart, and that we should come down, to allow him to live out what God had put on his heart," says Scott Heldreth.

So there goes little Joshie, doing his daddy proud, walking right up to the sheriff's deputies, carrying his plastic cup of water. After he refused two orders to halt, deputies cuffed his hands behind his back and loaded him into a van with 14-year-old twin girls. At the courthouse, the three youngsters were photographed, finger-printed and released. Josh described the event with smarminess worthy of the most self-righteous fundamentalist: "We were smiling for Jesus and they didn't like that much," he said. Which proves that if you get to a kid early enough, you can probably have him throwing his first firebomb into a clinic before he even discovers masturbation. You can bet your sweet ass he will be combat ready for North Korean duty by the time he's eighteen.

My redneck psychotherapist friend Brad Blanton tells me that militarization and open democratic societies do not work together at all and produce pathologies at both the individual and collective levels. Thus we get such conflicted bullshit as the U.S. soldiers being kind to that Iraqi boy wiggling around in his pus-stained bed like a bandaged grub because an America bomb took off his arms and legs. "Attention private first class Leroy Rodriguez Jackson! Stand forward and give that dusky little torso with a head a chocolate bar and a Wal-Mart teddy bear. And grin for the camera, for Christ sake! Hey let's airlift the kid to Germany, mount four metal claws on the stumps, and hang him on the playground monkey bars. Make a great PR shot! One thing for sure, that one won't ever be driving any suicide car bombs into the compound, right private?" (Heh, heh,heh!)

But you have to feel sorry for Private Jackson. It is his ass that gets caught in the disconnect, as he tries to wrap his head around how to be "lethal and compassionate." As in "Kill the motherfuckers, but be loving and kind to children as you blow their parents' guts out onto the sidewalk." People who kill other people are desensitized. Humans are hardened to the face of suffering; the killing becomes reality, compassion an abstraction. Private Jackson is totally screwed. When he does his soldierly duty of causing misery, death and maiming, he must do it compassionately, according to some hallucination generated in the Pentagon by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. The hallucination is transferred through the chain of command

## Joe Bageant / Free People Do Bad Things

until it gets to where the rubber meets the road – then five privates go on trial for hurting an enemy they were specifically trained to kill. Anyone who has ever been in the armed forces understands the certain hypocrisy of the proposition.

For some reason though, civilians, smugly ensconced in their recliners and on barstools, cannot grasp why ignorant kid soldiers do horrible things during wars. I once defended Lynndie England in print and got hundreds of emails demonizing the poor Appalachian mutt girl, saying that she dishonored our “heroes” in Iraq. State generated garbage such as “Lethal and compassionate” works fine for these people, whose entire lives have been spent in the controlled environment of America’s industrial military state marketing messages. All these post-teens in desert camo, the ones making the “good kills,” as an appropriately conducted murder of an Iraqi is deemed military parlance, they are heroes on the TV news. Funny how you cannot see their Clearasil on TV. I have never seen as much acne medicine as when I was in the military during the Nam era, of which this war reminds me greatly.

As James Carroll brilliantly put it in “A Nation Lost” (Boston Globe 4/22/03):

*“Photographic celebrations of our young warriors, glorifications of released American prisoners, heroic rituals of the war dead all take on the character of crass exploitation of the men and women in uniform. First they were forced into a dubious circumstance, and now they are themselves being mythologized as its main post-facto justification – as if the United States went to Iraq not to seize Saddam (disappeared), or to dispose of weapons of mass destruction (missing), or to save the Iraqi people (chaos), but “to support the troops.” War thus becomes its own justification. Such confusion on this grave point, as on the others, signifies a nation lost”*

I just heard that Vern and Sherry’s kid, Glen, got killed in Iraq. Vern and Sherry lived in a log cabin near me on the Coeur de Alene Reservation in Idaho a couple decades ago, back when many white people lived on little plots inside the res. Vern had emphysema, Sherry weighed over 300 pounds, and they had a white malamute dog named Ike. The isolation bothered us older (were you old 20 years ago?) people sometimes, and Vern and I drank a lot of whiskey during the six winters I lived there. Hell it was two miles to the mailbox and seven miles to the main road, there was no electricity, and about the only fun available in winter was drinking,

## Joe Bageant / Free People Do Bad Things

guitar picking and horse logging when the ground froze solid enough. But Glen was a little loner and never seemed to mind.

Anyway, Glen, that skinny kid in the fatigues who loved to fish and hunt and damned near set my cabin on fire once while playing with matches, is dead. Killed by a roadside IED. And I cannot help but think about the road that led him to Baghdad. The one that started with the deepest love of his crippled up ole daddy and ended, right along with his chances in life, right after high school when there was no possibility of college and no work within a hundred miles of the reservation. The kid was quick as a whip, just like his daddy who could draw, do calc in his head and break horses on those days he had enough wind to tackle the job. And like his daddy, Glen was born into one of those corners of America where people are rooted in the earth they were born upon and grow up grounded enough not to care about making it in the big city or imitating what they see on television. They also grow up proud of their country, untroubled by the bitter truths borne by more educated people. Their notion of patriotism has to do with a sense of place and people, blood, kin and whatever higher power rustles the branches great red fir trees, animates both the chipmunk and the mountain lion, and stirs fish to leap in the rivers. Hard as it will be for urban readers to understand, Glen was a stone cold country boy of a kind mostly vanished from America. The real thing. Now he is dead and now the Iraq War has plucked the most sacred thing from the lives of a poor crippled up old man and his huge sad wife crying in their shabby little cabin on the range above the Minneloosa Valley in Idaho. People like Dick Cheney or Donald Rumsfeld could give a goddamned what I think. In fact, millions of fellow Americans who support the war could care less what banged up old writer down in Virginia thinks. So I know I am yelling into the wind. But I think there is not one goddamned thing in the entire nation of Iraq worth the life of that boy.

One wonders just how long the slaughter can be sanitized by the state. A quarter million young men and women will eventually return. At least a few of them will speak the truth, though our supine media will not hear them unless it is sweeps week and they need the ratings.

But overall, we can expect more of the same. Thousands more dead, blood and treasure hemorrhaged on desert sand for the satisfaction of an elite cult of aging rich men obsessed with power. Americans seem not too worried. They knowingly reelected the men who orchestrated perhaps the bloodiest public hoodwinking in

## Joe Bageant / Free People Do Bad Things

American history, one spawned in secrecy, hatched behind closed doors and launched upon the world amid a flurry of the most vulgar sort of lies. Lies so huge, so brazen that even now most Americans simply do not believe anyone would have that kind of balls. Dick Cheney has said that: "The American people will continue to support this ongoing effort to establish freedom and democracy in the world."

Or to put it in the parlance of the dwarves of darkness behind the thick oval room curtain: "The dumb fucks will never see through it."

*Joe Bageant is a writer and magazine editor living in Winchester, Virginia. He may be contacted at [bageantjb@netscape.net](mailto:bageantjb@netscape.net). Copyright 2005 by Joe Bageant.*

Read  
more  
**essays**  
by Joe  
Bageant

Download all of Joe Bageant's satirical essays,  
plus many more books, booklets, essays,  
newspapers and magazines – all in pdf format  
– all free of charge, at [www.coldtype.net](http://www.coldtype.net)  
*(Click on this link to enter web site)*

**ColdType**

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD