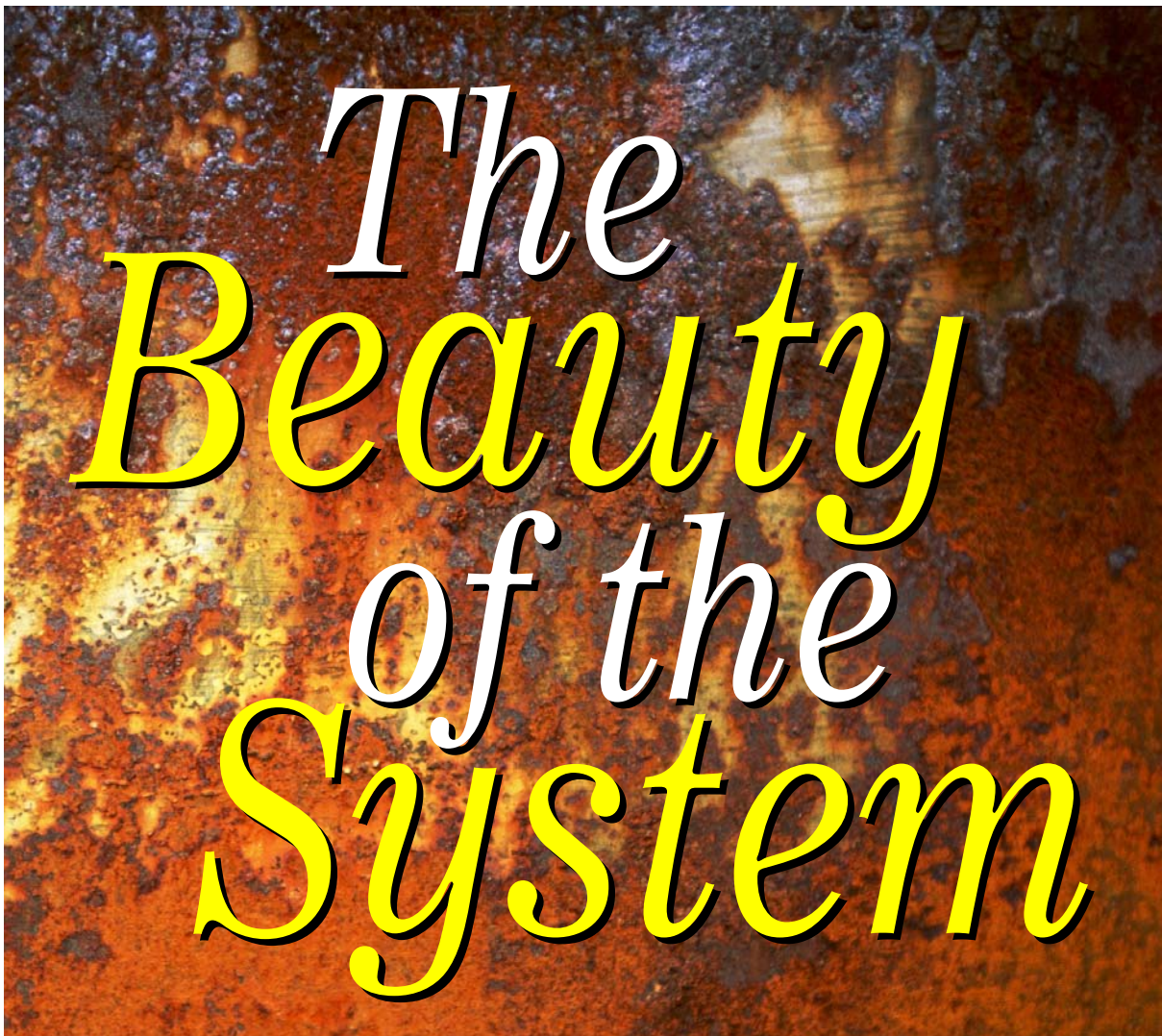


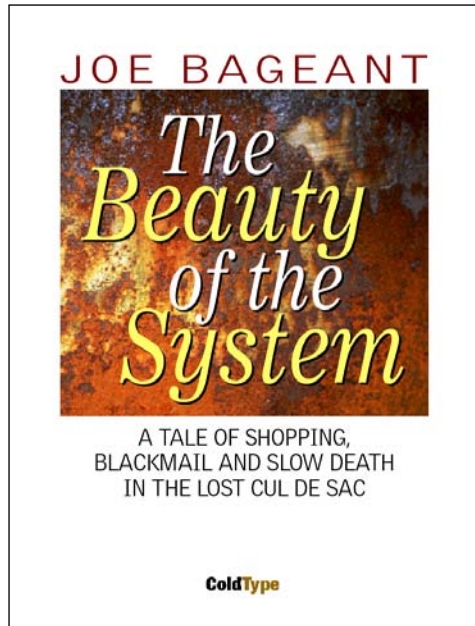
JOE BAGEANT



*The  
Beauty  
of the  
System*

A TALE OF SHOPPING,  
BLACKMAIL AND SLOW DEATH  
IN THE LOST CUL DE SAC

**ColdType**



**Joe Bageant** is the author of a forthcoming book, **Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War** from Random House Crown on working class America, to be released on April 24, 2007.

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 [ww.joebageant.com](http://ww.joebageant.com).

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**ColdType**

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD  
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**America** is a dark half continent of grotesque notions made manifest, such as Scientology, the GOP and the McDonald's "Big Bowl" meal. Americans seem to possess psychic flypaper that attracts strange unsavory notions. Worse yet, we act upon them.

One notion we got into our heads right after World War II was that each generation must live better than the previous one. Not such a bad idea at the time, considering the number of folks in the previous generation who grew up during the Depression and knew what it was like to scratch with the chickens to survive. Consequently, the post-war generation was more than satisfied with a 900-square foot home, a refrigerator, a television, a car and presentable clothing – any of which beat the hell out of drafty outhouses and scarlet fever. Throw in the GI bill entitlement for vets and you're looking at a pretty nice package for the post-war generation who brought us the baby boom and the two-ton, 17-foot 1954 Ford Customline 8 sedan. Further excess was inescapable. As Cotton Mather might well have said, had he the benefit of blasting down America's new interstates with a Chesterfield dangling from his lips and a cold Pabst in his pale Protestant claw, "BRING IT ON!"

And so here we are sixty years after the Big War with an expanded American sense of middle class entitlement. Ramcharged by extreme American capitalism and abetted by the carnie barkers of Madison Avenue, everyone in the middle class now feels

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entitled to the full-blown suburban lifestyle, every last digitized, low fat, high density, energy sucking bit of it. It all starts with a college degree. Then in return for knocking down those hard earned Cs in university business or technical schools, the children and grandchildren of people who thought a big closet was one so deep you could reach your entire arm into it (“That sucker must be two feet deep Helen! Now THAT’S storage!”) feel entitled to 3,000-4,000 square-foot houses. And forget the lone old family wagon. The suburban middle class expects a car for every family member, not to mention an investment portfolio, several household cell phones, multiple television screens, (36 percent of buyers under age 35 rated having a “home theater” as important or very important in their lives, according to National Association of Home Builders), multiple baths, central air conditioning, DVD players, washer-dryer combinations, laptops, iPods, answering machines, MP3 players, patio furniture, outdoor gas barbecues, digital cameras, car audio, security and navigational systems, microwave ovens, camcorders, HDTV receivers, satellite systems, VCRs, Xbox controllers, water purifiers, coffee/espresso maker combos, closet organizers, software, mountain bikes, camping and hiking equipment, software ...

Phew! I can remember a time when my wife and I felt upscale because we bought a Sunbeam blender – one of those solid chrome plated babies with the heavy glass 34-ounce jar. Hoooweee! Invite the neighbors. Banana smoothies for everybody! At any rate, Americans now have entire rooms specialized by appliance such as entertainment systems, home computers, and exercise equipment ... It was not inevitable that we would arrive at such a point. It took a helluva lot of public greed and capitalist sucker-bait to make us the very spoiled and dangerous porcine folk we have become, people whose lives under the Empire constitute the most extreme material luxury and wealth the world has ever known, and the most oppressive and nihilistic one from a global standpoint.

Still, it’s not easy being an upscale suburban white middle class American. There is a certain amount of guilt involved. (Cut to forty million black Americans laughing hysterically.) Waking up to suburban life’s true global cost is like finding out that you have a hundred slaves in some unseen place on the other side of the world making your clothing, working in your mines and harvesting your Gevelia coffee. It’s more than a conundrum. It’s a moral confrontation with real justice and values. Jefferson had the same conflict about his slave ownership. He never came to grips with it either. Old Tom never freed that piece of side action, Sally Hemmings. Nor are we

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about to demand freedom for the sweatshop slaves who turn endangered nyatoh rainforest trees into Sears “classic and timeless patio furniture.” Who is gonna turn down an Everyday Martha Stewart Stockbridge 5-Piece Bistro set for a hundred and fifty bucks? “Fuck the eco-kooks, what they need is a good bath and a character-building hitch in the Marines, preferably in Iraq.” Of course we never say such things. We never even think them. We don’t think at all when the in-laws are coming in from the West Coast and we need that patio set for entertaining. The renunciation of earthly goods is no easy thing if your father-in-law fought his way across Italy in the Big War, then came home to work 70 hours a week building up a business so you could “have it better than we had it,” and is damned proud of the way his kids and grandkids are flourishing in what he considers a consumer paradise of goods and opportunities. What’s to renounce? “Life is good here in Brambleton. “Hell, why don’t you kids get a Hummer? You have the children’s safety to think of, you know.” “Yes dad, we thought about a Hummer, but we’re holding off for GM’s new Huey commuter model helicopter gunship.”

### **Is this heaven Paw? No, it's Brambleton**

The above dialogue may be a parody, but Brambleton is a real place. And today I am passing through it under the slowly arching mid-morning sun, which seems to be the only moving thing today in this Northern Virginia development. There is not a human or even a car in sight down the long wide streets, just a crystallized silence occasionally nicked by the chirp of an unseen sparrow. My rusted out 18-year-old Toyota truck moving slowly along the streets, with its oxidized paint and a dead air conditioner sticking up from its bed gives all the more impression of some post apocalyptic scene from a not-quite-nameable film. A distinct eeriness pervades the sculpted green landscape and its too-bluish precast artificial stone retaining walls and artlessly placed trees, as though it were a movie set about to be torn down any minute, an illusion created for the moment. And in a way it is. Even something as timeless as a tree becomes a prop in places like Brambleton; they will be landfill in a few years because several feet of top and subsoil were scraped during site preparation. Trees won’t survive in what’s left, no matter how much mulch, fertilizer and watering is done. But they look OK now in a place where the average house is six years old, in a planned community with no communal memory, no sense of time’s trajectory in which one can sense a future, or a common weal except through

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changes in real estate prices. CNN Money has called this place, 29 miles west of Washington D.C., one of the best places to live in America.

The cost of living in Loudon County's Ashburn, of which Brambleton is but one of 60 such communities, is 76% above the national average, with houses running between \$600,000 and \$1.2 million. Which is why I commute to work in Loudoun County from Winchester, for a \$40,000 a year job so I can live in a town that is only 41% above the national average, according to Forbes (or 2% below average if you believe the local Chamber of Commerce.) Still, Forbes calls Winchester one of the "best places," despite that the median household income is only \$34,335, and 13.2% of the population is below the poverty line. Evidently, Forbes and CNN Money give a helluva lot of weight to the Washington Redskins and the contemplative benefits of sitting in snarled traffic twice a day.

They may be right about the latter. Sitting in jammed traffic ignoring chest pains offers me time to speculate on the lives in these 4,000- and even 15,000-square-foot houses with four- and even six-car garages. For example, often as not, one entire side of each of these houses is windowless, or nearly so. What the hell do they do in those windowless spaces? Entertain themselves, surely, but how? I imagine all sorts of strange sexual devices at play, though I'm sure it comes down simply to darkened rooms with entertainment centers and big plasma TV screens, the kind that have built-in cooling systems of their own. What the hell kind of television needs its own cooling system? "Holy fuck, it's a plasma meltdown! Heather! Call 911! Get the kids into the shelter!"

Or I speculate on the sheer number of shopping centers in Ashburn alone – Old Ashburn Square, Cameron Chase Village Center, Ashburn Farm Village Center, Ashburn Farm Town Center, Ashburn Village Center, Broadlands Center, Truro Parish, Broadlands Village Center, Ashburn Town Square, Loudoun Valley, Old Town Shopping Center, University Center ... It's a shopper's dream all right. There is a Buddhist principle to the effect that the dream also dreams the dreamer. And that's what happened with the American Dream, which is why we are all sleepwalking through this escalating nightmare of meaninglessness, unable to shake ourselves awake.

How much unnecessary and meaningless shopping is humanly possible under the spell of The American Dream? Obviously a lot. Enough at least to make it "one of America's top national pastimes." According to the Roper Center for Public Opinion

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Research – whores to the last man, I can tell you from my magazine work experience, but nevertheless pretty straight in their broader national reports – 66% of Americans see mere browsing as an important leisure experience and 73% prefer to shop at shopping centers to catalogues, TV or online. Roper recommends “that stores further reinforce shopping as a leisure activity as a hedge against the current economic uncertainty. Americans continue to be optimistic about their futures – almost three-quarters (73%) expressed general optimism about their personal futures – but optimism about the economy is down slightly (off five points since February). This is the time to build and strengthen relationships and loyalty, just in case the economy does continue to weaken.”

In other words, three-quarters of Americans actually believe that if the economy goes tits up, they won't be affected. So marketers and retailers are advised to keep luring them in and blowing smoke up their asses as long as the wind holds out.

Middle class consumers will bend over for the smoke job. Face it. There seems to be no defense whatsoever from shopping when it comes to the suburban middle class, except the direst sort of poverty and bankruptcy. Now I consider myself a socialist who tries to avoid needless consumption. “Yea, sure buddy. And Godzilla is a vegetarian.” But if you are living in America, even the implied material modesty of socialism will not save you from shopping. Even foreign-born citizens raised in nobler, more ascetic creeds go down under American consumerism like wheat before the scythe. Ever watch a naturalized Indian matron with that dot on her forehead when a blue light special kicks in at K-Mart? “Set of three Country Floral Kitchen Towels, just \$5.99!” I'm here to tell you dear hearts, Mama Abja's sari bursts into a furious orange blur and you'd best get out of her way.

Not that I am any better than Mama Abja. When I pass a music store with guitars in the window, I need at least a set of strings, despite that I have 10 new sets at home. A sale on men-with-big-beer gut trousers at the mall can also nail me. Like the folks in Brambleton, I'm fucked, though on a smaller budget. This desire to buy stuff, just about any kind of stuff, seems to be universal. Last spring I watched a Mayan woman in full native costume at a Belizean flea market buy a used Bun and Thigh Max, doubtlessly an American castoff. Whatever did she need that for? She packs those baskets around on her head all day, chops wood or totes kerosene to cook every damned tortilla her family eats, surely walks a few miles a day in the course of village work life. And she needs a Thigh Max?” The detritus of American junk capital-

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ism seems to be coming down just about everywhere on the planet.

All of this has reshaped America politically. For starters, these tribes of the consumer savannah lands are never liberals, regardless of their claimed political allegiances. Certainly not here alongside Washington DC at the heart of power, influence, financial regulation and lawmaking and the defense contracting business. They have benefited immensely from the “financializing” and militarization of our economy. These are the winners in the national “lifestyle” game, and they will vote for whoever looks most likely to keep raw materials and goods flowing from the far-flung corners of the Empire, even if it must be done at gunpoint (which is known as establishing democracy around the world). They don’t need no steenking global sheriffs to preserve social justice or anything else. They need a “strong leader” who will spread democracy and protect the American Lifestyle. As George Bush has said repeatedly, “the American lifestyle is not negotiable.” We might add that neither is global warming. Having the highest per capita number of bathrooms on the planet will not compensate for the Atlantic Ocean creeping into the hollers of Kentucky. Just a hunch.

### **The politics of the comfort zone**

Meanwhile, what we have stretching from this computer screen all the way to Washington D.C. are a couple of million people, citizens clustered like ticks on the spotless suburban belly of an allegedly fat republic. Strangers in the lost cul de sac squinting at one another briefly as they get into their cars. In the super-burbs there are no places where residents encounter people unlike themselves, or encounter people at all once the garage door has dropped shut. Only that inside the fuck boxes and the roadside world seen during the miserable commute to DC or The Beltway is “where the money is.” For the most affluent here, that commute will soon be made easier by the installation of “Lexus Lanes,” in which the highest rollers can pay a toll and escape being in the same lane with anonymous me and my rusted out truck with the dead window style air conditioner bouncing in the bed.

I say anonymous because, generally speaking, there is no way I can meet them without significant extra effort (which I suspect is how they prefer it.) Even if I go to them, there are no civic or public spaces where we are likely to encounter one another. Not even in passing on a sidewalk because there are no sidewalks out there in the



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beautiful system. There is no actual town center to these places, although most retain some vestige of the community they engulfed, a gas station, a hardware store, and here in Virginia there is usually an old feed store, a barn or two, refurbished as businesses, so they can display “quaintness” to visitors. But mainly there are just the malls and schools supported by money beyond the comprehension of core urban dwellers, schools with a lacrosse club, rowing, tenth grade class trips to France and Italy ...

These people do not consider themselves rich, or their families particularly elite. Yet their kids, after finishing expensive educations, will eventually take the reins of the administrative class, university deans, government bureaucrats, financial managers, publishing and electronic media people, etc. Then they will continue to put the schackle to the other four-fifths of Americans, not to mention the world, without flinching. And they will continue to consider themselves quite ordinary Americans, and expect their children to do even better. Though it is nowhere near the middle demographically, this is the true middle class in America, the group that meets the criteria we are trained to associate with the term “middle class.” In truth they only represent about 10% of the population. Maaaaybe 15%. The dangerous 15% in my opinion. Not that they ever ask me. Or you, dear reader. The typical progressive person reading this is, most likely to be, let us say, a schoolteacher or a computer programmer, someone of similar stripe. The planetary and societal criminality of the three-quarter million dollar fuck-box crowd are not your fault. Or mine.

Not entirely anyway. But if we were talking about American consumerism and its global criminality, then you and I get to hold at least one end of the turd. Right now I am sitting at the keyboard clad in only in my underwear and a \$60 Eddie Bauer fishing vest, doubtlessly made with sweatshop labor, while my usually shaggy dog, Bingo, sports his \$50 summer haircut as he pants patiently alongside me in a 2,600-square-foot house, occupied by only two people. And here I am talking to you about consumption while the cost of Bingo’s haircut alone would buy one family a month’s groceries on half of the planet. I never said I was a good example of what I blather about (or a pretty sight while writing.) The best defense I can muster is that if you live inside the Empire there is no escaping the Empire’s rules of pay to play.

Early next year, spirits willing, I will be able to extract myself from the Empire – or the worst of it anyway – without losing a wife and a family in the process. But for

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now it's me and Bingo sitting here doing the best we can until then. Time is required for love and marriage to triumph over consumer capitalism, so deeply has it penetrated American life, both here on my ancient street in Winchester and out there in the super-suburbs. Things must be worked out ever-so-carefully to escape the system's exquisite blackmail of its own people.

### **But you promised us blackmail too**

American extreme capitalism's blackmail is based upon basic human need – especially health care. For example, my wife is on my employer's insurance. She works for a local public library which grants insurance, even crappy insurance, only to a select few because the library never knows when its funds may be cut, now that the need for depleted uranium artillery shells has superceded the need for children's books in the national scheme of things. So its board, in all its wisdom, keeps costs so close to the bone the marrow shows. That means employees with no benefits or insurance. Thus, I must keep my job creating military magazines – the pervasive symmetry of a military-industrial consumer-based economy never ceases to amaze me – so we can both have insurance, even though I could't give a damn about insurance for myself, despite my lousy health. The day-to-day consequences of cooperating with the beautiful system's insurance-as-blackmail racket are staggering, and most surprisingly, lead to increasingly poorer health. It's quite literally killing me so I can have the insurance that is supposed to keep me healthy. Smothering me to death, actually. It's like this:

It is a Tuesday in July and I am driving to work, down, down past the sprawling geometry of the DC exurbs. At 7:30am, the thermometer has already hit 80 degrees on a code orange air alert day – meaning the polluted air is especially dangerous to those with breathing disorders. I gasp for breath most of the hour-long commute because I have COPD, cardio obstructive pulmonary disease. I drift off the road onto the gravel or into the next lane at 60-70 miles per hour at least twice a week. A word to the wise: If you ever see a 1988 red Toyota truck coming your way on VA route 7 some morning, PULL OVER INTO THE DITCH! Jump the median strip if you have to, because whatever you do will be safer than being within a hundred yards of that truck and me. Nevertheless I have always managed to arrive at work in one piece to drag myself out of the truck, then try to hit the office with a fake spring in my step

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and a smile that says: “Godammit yall! I am deliriously happy to be here!” And I am. Hell, I survived another commute didn’t I? And so the old guy blanks at his work station, sucks on his rescue inhaler, and pushes through another day in the system.

(Special Bulletin: I have now begun to ride share with a fellow editor, who says, “OK, but touch that steering wheel just once and I’ll pinch your head off like a grape.”)

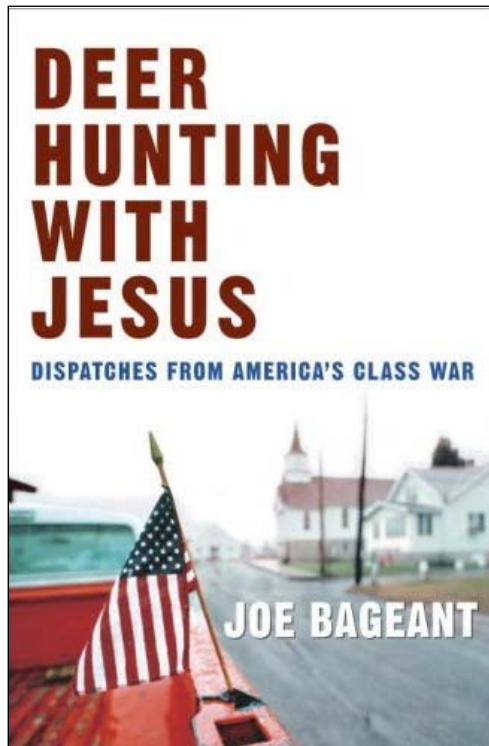
At home he wheezes and bitches and the family shows sympathy for the struggle, but are terrified of the possibility of the old guy abandoning the struggle. Better to die early with insurance than die happy and probably healthier without it. Family and even good friends are so conditioned they will literally watch you die piecemeal before their eyes, feel for your misery, confident that the beautiful system will provide whatever is needed when you fall off the crapper some morning with congestive heart failure. “Be glad you have insurance. COPD is expensive.” And every morning you get up alive is another morning to reassure themselves, “See, the old guy is still here. It can’t be that bad, can it?” I have come to realize they are as helpless as everyone else to change the system. What else could they say? And so life goes on. And the carpets need shampooing and the house painters are coming tomorrow and the McCabes want to have drinks after work on Friday. The same obliviousness and denial maintaining Brambleton’s equilibrium operates here too, maintaining the consumer state’s productive momentum.

With a couple drinks in me, I often talk about how the Empire’s beautiful system is not only killing me, but a skillion others across the globe we don’t even see. And I talk about simply leaving, going someplace to write and rot. Just leave like so many others have done of late. And they look around and see that there are millions of Americans still here, people just like themselves, and they think to themselves, “Things can’t be as bad as Joe makes them out to be.” What they don’t see is the couple of million Americans who had sense enough to flee the system as its shadow grew increasingly ominous, not to mention unworkably expensive. My best friend Ken in France says, “Joe, your photographs look so unhealthy. You are killing yourself for a house payment.” And he’s right. But what does a man do? Just run off? Leave the wife holding the bag for the bills and the dogs hopelessly waiting to jump on the bed with me when I get home from work?

Ah yes, home from work. At last. Again. Can’t catch even half a breath. No air any-

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where, especially in an old non central air-conditioned house. As always, the mail is piled on the kitchen table, and in it is a letter from the Democratic Party announcing that they are putting the heat on the administration. I stumble upstairs and turn on the bedroom window unit air conditioner, suddenly struck by the thought that even in Brambleton there must be similarly blackmailed husbands/fathers coming home in the same sad shape, equally aware of the global injustice involved in their lifestyle, yet equally cowed by the brutal consequences of deviating from the system's prescribed order. And I fall upon the bed to watch an old CSI ... to watch Catherine Willows step within the yellow crime scene tape marking the sacred spot from which the ritual of our collective revenge for some make-believe injustice will proceed ... And the cool air blows across the bed, and Bingo is licking my fingers and for a few moments at least, I am suffered up unto the sheer anesthetic bliss of the beauty of our system.



Order Joe Bageant's new book

## **DEER HUNTING WITH JESUS: Dispatches From America's Class War**

"Many friends and readers will notice that the title has changed to *Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches From America's Class War*. The original title was *Drink, Pray, Fight, Fuck: Dispatches From America's Class War*. Contrary to what one might suspect, the name change had not as much to do with the word "fuck" as it did the fact that a book was recently released with a very similar title. Then too, when I started putting the title "Drink, Pray, Fight, Fuck" on the web, it kicked off some merchandising by small scale entrepreneurs of ball caps, tee-shirts, etc. bearing the four words. Which is no problem with me -- I like to see the little guy printing tee-shirts make a buck" – **JOE BAGEANT**

Pre-order now from [www.amazon.com/Deer-Hunting-Jesus-Dispatches-Americas/dp/030733936X/ref=pd\\_sxp\\_f\\_pt/104-7289464-5668749?ie=UTF8](http://www.amazon.com/Deer-Hunting-Jesus-Dispatches-Americas/dp/030733936X/ref=pd_sxp_f_pt/104-7289464-5668749?ie=UTF8)

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