

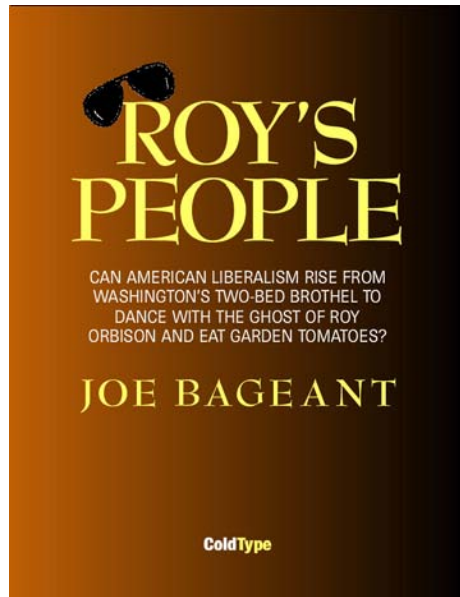


# ROY'S PEOPLE

CAN AMERICAN LIBERALISM RISE FROM  
WASHINGTON'S TWO-BED BROTHEL TO  
DANCE WITH THE GHOST OF ROY  
ORBISON AND EAT GARDEN TOMATOES?

## JOE BAGEANT

**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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he Shenandoah is not a bar. It's not a tavern. It's a beer joint. The kind that does cash-only business and scratches hard for every nickel it turns. And lately, it is about the only place in my life slowed down and dumbed down enough to honestly relax. It takes a couple of hours. Nearly everyone here on this Sunday morning lives or grew up within blocks of the place and feels most at home here...like me – I used to sell newspapers on the corner here at age 12 and who, if the light is right, can imagine that pale, scruffy youngster shouting *Paaaaaapers! NoozPaaaaaapers!* Such nostalgia eases the frustrated wildness in old men.

This particular beer joint, deemed the seediest in town by good citizens who've never even set foot in the place, is operated by Denny, an overweight blonde fellow with breasts and earrings. Denny is going through a sex change and lives every minute of it right up front for a fundamentalist Southern town to ogle. The Pentecostal mission two doors down must certainly be praying hard for Denney's soul, especially on Saturday nights, when Denney does what he calls "my show." It's a real smoker, sort of a cross between Charlie Rich and the Righteous Brothers.

Ordering a Bud Light, I see that it is now up to \$2.25, a sure sign of inflation and approaching collapse of society if ever there was one. A person on minimum age works an hour for the price of two beers. Meanwhile, a grizzled red-haired old bachelor pulls up onto the stool next to me, a drywall hanger named Wilf, whose grin reveals enough silver in his teeth for the Lone Ranger to make a couple dozen bullets. Sitting next to Wilf can be a good thing or an aggravating thing, depending. See,

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the drunker he gets the more educated he claims to be. Last night Wilf was all the way up to being a Harvard graduate. Which is to say he was bullet-proof drunk. But this morning here he is, sitting up and taking nourishment and talking about the one thing that verifies sanity and trustworthiness, in fact the only truly important thing at this time of year in the American South – garden tomatoes. “My tomaters are doing real good. I’ve got more than I have had in years. It’s been hot, tomaters like that.” In one of typically stupid lefty slipups, wherein we tend to spout knee-jerk bullshit instead of taking part in real conversations about real subjects such as tomatoes, I venture that the excessive heat this summer may be due to global warming. To which he replies, “Well then, I don’t have no problem with global warmin.”

Fortunately I am saved further embarrassment by a voice two stools down, that of a woman who has been listening in. “Anybody know where to buy a couple bushels of tomatoes?” asks Pauline, a 60-something bleach blonde sporting either a wig or the most perfect 1960s hair job on earth. Clearly, she was once a looker and dresses up to come down to the Shenandoah. “I try to keep myself up nice,” she says. Big city people might be surprised that Pauline is shopping for tomatoes in a beer joint. “I wanna get’em home grown,” she says, “not from some farmers’ market, where people just buy crates of’em from the warehouse and pretend they’re real tomatoes. I’ve had a big garden all my life, but since I sold the place to pay Clarence’s hospital bills [Her husband died a few years back] and I moved to the trailer court, I can’t get good tomatoes. I’m telling you nothing grows in a trailer court. Nothing.”

Pauline draws about \$650 Social Security, and works cleaning houses because she cannot live on such an extravagant sum. Some people just cannot handle money. For every three dollars she earns a dollar is deducted from her SS. Just keeping track of it would drive a person nuts. I’ll find out in a couple of years.

Anyway, she walked out of the Shenandoah with a sure deal on those tomatoes. And Wilf will pick them and deliver’em personally. This very evening. Judging from the unusual warmth in Pauline’s eye, I’d be willing to bet folding cash that Wilf’s gonna get lucky tonight. Wilf looked rather shocked when he realized what might be in store while delivering those tomatoes. You never saw a man finish a beer so fast so he could get to his garden. In fact, old Pauline didn’t linger too damned long either. There are brew pubs and pick-up bars, then there’s the Shenandoah, where even old Harvard drywallers stand a chance.

By noon the Shenandoan are numb to existential pain...well, not so much numb

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as buzzed enough to grease the skids well enough to survive another week of toil. In this dim place with the white Christmas mini-lights on the ceiling, America's hardest working people are just sitting down, or "Staying off my feet," as the expression goes, pleasantly giddy enough to have a few laughs, share pointless banter, momentarily free of the bossman's eye and the bills in the mailbox.

You might call these Roy Orbison's people. And if Roy were alive today he'd sitting at the bar with Johnny, Pauline and Wilf, wearing his dark glasses of course, and drinking Bud Light. And he would have probably winked at Pauline to make her feel good, and he'd drink in the people's pains and joys and loves, then go write a song about it. The man had empathy.

Empathy is scarce stuff in America in these times of "culture war." And all these folks, Pauline, Wilf, and even Denney to a certain extent, despite the political stereotyping his sexuality invites, are supposedly the "other side," in the culture war. Which is actually a class war by another name. We call it a culture war because educated influencers write books for similarly educated people who have been indoctrinated to interpret reality in such terms. Not a person here has ever heard of the culture wars. No one here cares about politics because politics longer cares about them, or the increasing struggle of hard working people. This makes them the traditional natural base for the Democratic Party, though the party refuses to claim them, and seems to have forgotten (or simply refuses to acknowledge) that the pyramid of American society is far broader toward the bottom than the top. In any case, they have become numb to America.

Still, in this place you can feel America's people. Just like Roy felt them. It's not an inspiring America. It's not even a passable America. But it's an America where, contrary to the national lie, people do manage to accept one another. Poorly educated, beaten-down working folks, essentially Christian people, accept the queer, the biker, the Mexican and the Iranian swish, laughing and joking and singing until that last sad hour when their ten or twenty bucks is spent. Then they go back to lives that cannot ever achieve what middle class people would call modest success. But they know as truth what I can only allege in brittle, lifeless text. They know that all of us are in this together. They understand because in life they are exposed to the truth about what our country has become, and perhaps always was. There is no escape for them into insulated suburbs or high rise apartments or condos. They must live it every day of their lives to survive at all. Consequently, in this redneck beer joint is

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human respect and open laughter, drunken crying, friendship between people whom we are told are bigots, and whom we are told do not associate and do not like one another,. We are told this by people in whose best interests it is to see the working class divided. Still, it would be beyond naïve to say the mutual acceptance of these people offers hope for social unity among Americans. Not in a country where every living citizen has breathed in the air of Darwinian capitalism from birth. It merely offers a small respite from animal struggle.

There is not a soul here who gives a flying fig about the internet or politics in general. After all, what does either of them do for these people's lives? They certainly do nothing for Johnny D, over on my left, who sips at a Pepsi, exhales a whisp of menthol cigarette smoke, and says, "I think I'll make waffles tomorrow. The boys always like waffles." Johnny takes care of three elderly men in a licensed one-story house on the west side of town. The oldest is 91. Johnny lives in the basement. He spends most of his time in that house except when he comes down to the Shenandoah. Thin, maybe 50, with a pearl stud earring, he is always immaculate in that way of homosexuals of the old school. Quiet in manner, he has that low keyed serenity of those who've seen more than they can ever tell, and wouldn't bother to if they could. He fixes the residents breakfast and they eat together in the small homey dining area, where you can smell the cooking and see the cook and sit down to eat with fellow human beings in a atmosphere not unlike what the residents had in their working lives. Johnny is their friend, surely a harried or stern one at times, but a friend.

It may not be a yuppie vision of the twilight years, but I'll say this: If I had to die in a care facility, which I refuse to ever do, I would want to die in one with the smell of my eggs frying and the sight of a Johnny doing the cooking. I'd want to watch with whatever feeble comprehension available to me. I'd want to sit at that table in that house which binds together four people against the sort of loneliness that is the fate of so many elderly folks in this new and better America, where we view one another in passing cars, sealed in GM or Jap made vacuums, making duly routed and unquestioned courses through the Empire's circuitry to utterly meaningless places with urgency or in complete numbness – creatures of the Empire's greatest fiction.

The fiction is that we are all individuals and not part of a common human fate, that we are separate from each other. That we make our choices in solitary thought, uninfluenced by the machinery of the corporate state, uninfluenced while in the aisles of the big box stores and the voting booth. Every waking moment in our soci-

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ety reinforces these illusions to the point that the citizen-as-consumer is convinced of the most important fiction of all – that American-style capitalism is the natural progressive order of the world.

Like all great fiction, it provides moments of comic relief, typically through irony. Thus, we watch the development of liberal political “strategy.” One has to laugh. Laugh first at the notion that the Hamptons Country Club leadership now designing “national strategy” could ever make working people getting poorer by the day ever believe in them for Christ sake. The people sitting around the Shenandoah this morning will never believe that a gaggle of cagey, sophisticated multi-millionaire party leaders being limoed from the Ritz Carlton to their appearance on Jon Stewart are somehow going to look out for the blood-smearred guys and gals down at the chicken plant. Or the blood-smearred guys in Iraq for that matter. It’s too late for that. They cannot raise the already dead. They are complicit in the same power poker game as the Republicans and they will remain that way, as my neighbor puts it: “Until the dumb motherfucking voters can see beyond the price of a gallon of gas.” Or the office basketball pool or the next staged election year non-issue. The real issues are always moral, usually involving purposeful neglect of some portion of society, which is supposed to be the Democratic arena.

Yet every honest candidate who dares mention such issues is deemed “too far left to be workable.” Then they are squashed like Ralph Nader or Dennis Kucinich, or the notion of kicking the insurance companies entirely out of our health care system and declaring universal health care as a citizen right like most civilized nations have done. And then, after having killed everyone around them but members of their country club, the national leadership comes back to us talking about “renewal.” And offers brilliant ideas such as pulling out of Iraq three years and thousands of corpses too late.

Even being aware of the process is not much help. What we can do personally that would make the slightest difference? So we continue to let a political managerial expert class advise and run the only game in town, and contribute time and money to the very people who engineered liberal failure for the past 30 years. Academic “framers,” wonks and just plain bullshit artists hawking out-of touch candidates – though there small signs of hope as we enjoy watching Joe the ho’ Lieberman finally strangle in his own stench. Nowhere was it more savored than amid the drooling political junkies of the blogosphere, that cyber-fiction of freedom where unhappy

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minions of the Empire rant about “strategies” instead of taking to the streets where the voters and potential voters are, particularly those very voters who damned well need what the Democrats once offered. Time was, when Democrats used to put money in the budget for older Americans and others for social programs – at least enough for some goddamned bingo games and an occasional dance for the widowed and the lonely. Maybe we need to kidnap the leadership and force them to listen to Roy’s songs for twenty-four hours straight.

Then too, how can well-meaning Democratic voters do anything, even if they were inclined to action? They are trapped in their cubicles doing the Empire’s most mundane tasks. So they settle for blogger world. (Ever notice how all the forums go completely dead at 5 PM?) None of which currently matters because neither the bloggers nor the candidates are going to shake the dirty hands they most need to become politically relevant again. First they would have to convince some very fucked over people in this country who gave up long ago on politicians that they are sincere.

To even begin doing that they will need to be in neighborhoods like this one year round, year after year, and be there even when there is NOT an election coming up. Fuck the last-minute “canvassing” and the highly paid liberal influencers’ advice. Personally go help somebody Like Pauline or one of her grandkids. Then the people will understand. That is reality-based politics. The kind that puts real people together face to face with feet planted in the same dirt.

The Republicans don’t do that. They don’t need to because they have assets that are very attractive to working people. Apparent passion, and a rootedness in the world of family, church and business. Call it a crock if you want, but conservatives, especially at the local level, can still talk to ordinary Americans. Some of them are lying like hell, even to themselves. Many of them are hateful too. But at least they can get the ear of, and still understand, ordinary people (and their leadership sure as hell exploits it.) But let’s at least acknowledge that they have it. Let’s even put aside the fact that Karl Rove is one evil fucking toad. He UNDERSTANDS PEOPLE, albeit at the most reptilian level. Most technocratic, rational, urbanized/suburbanized liberal leadership, not to mention half of their constituency don’t and never will. The Democratic Party and its movers and shakers at the local level have self-selected themselves out of existence as viable option.

Liberals, ever rational, attribute too much of Republican success to effective strate-



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gies. Sure, there are some involved. But they have also been successful because so many working people like Republicans as people better than they like Democrats. American elections being mere televised popularity contests, that's one hell of an advantage.

And what about that strategic masterpiece which brought so many Christian fundamentalists to the polls? Was that a masterpiece of networking and strategy? Hell no. Not that the Republicans aren't good strategists, but the fundies had church membership lists and the people like Karl Rove had sense enough to ask for them. And the local level Republicans were well liked enough that church leadership did not mind providing them, if for no other reason than, by damned, someone showed interest in them as a group. The churches, which liberals have always snickered at and now, since the elections, downright despise, are, regardless of the tragic magical thinking of religious fundamentalism, an organic, human community which responds to signs of respect for their group. But, once again it seems, the Democrats, already running second in a two-horse race, have decided to mount their own saddle backwards and hope the stench of Iraq and Katrina will bring down the GOP. Only Barack Obama gets it about churches, and tried to spell it out to Democrats recently. As near as I can tell, he got rotten-egged off the stage. Haven't heard much about it since. There seems to be no language left in the liberal political lexicon with which to address Christian faith. Just as there is no language in the conservative lexicon to address Islam.

That does not change the fact that about a third of Americans are moreover fundamentalist Christian people with very real problems no one is addressing. For them, the church is the only functioning institution left that reaches out to help, offering working families support of a kind no political party offers these days. Offer these people something they can see and feel happen to them, and you'd be pleasantly shocked at how many would have a change of heart. A sense of community and real support in the practical world brings far more folks to the church pews than the apocalyptic ranting of their preacher. And this can be done face to face. Go save a fundie. Or a Wilf or a Pauline or some of their families. Beer joints and fundamentalist churches, along with places such as temp labor offices, are among the roughest seams of American society, places where we can see not only how our society is rent, but also what it takes to be fixed.

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Here's a proposition that will get me egged, so I can go sit, in spirit at least with Obama (though I'm not entirely convinced he can remain the alternative he appears to be, after running the Democratic Party leadership gantlet.) The proposition is this:

Band together and raise a million dollars or two and put some deserving fundie kids thorough college. I know there are professional fundraisers among readers, a couple of them big-timers in the national non-profit and university rackets, because I've received emails from them over then years. As to which kids to help, you'll know the right ones when you see them. And believe me, their working class parents will not say no. Watch what happens. For an example, go to my website and read the letter from M. ([http://www.joebageant.com/joe/2006/08/growing\\_up\\_fear.html](http://www.joebageant.com/joe/2006/08/growing_up_fear.html)) I used to be one of those kids, and I know for sure the effect it would have on most families, and its ripple effect on entire communities. We are talking hearts and minds here. People who grew up taking higher education for granted – that 20% of Americans who graduate from a college or university – underestimate the impact of the experience on people from families who've never even hoped to attend. (The truly educated also ignore the tools higher education gave them to rationalize their own participation in the Empire's crimes, but that is another matter.)

Now I'm sure middle class liberals and their strategists have plenty of rational arguments why that cannot be done. Such as "Not an efficient use of funds regarding outcome..." What could be a better outcome than to free hundreds of young people from ignorance? Far better, they say, is to donate to larger, more effective organizations and liberal feel-good non-profits. Screw the feel-good stuff (such as the Heifer organization to which I contribute, but with increasing hesitation as I watch their magazine grow slicker and filled with more celebrities). Send a white trash kid to college, or at least community college. And when they get there, maybe sponsor a brave Oaxacan school teacher to come up here and teach'em to organize toward the best interests of their class. We have forgotten how to do it on this side of the maquiladora belt.

Or how about this? Take out a second mortgage on your own house to lift a kid out of ignorance. Or if you are too far in hock to the credit card companies to unass any green at all, then use a few vacation days and sick leave to help someone directly. Laugh. Now laugh some more. All we have at stake here is an emerging fascist state. It's time to bleed. On the other hand, we could cook up some risotto while lis-

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tening to NPR. But then there would be that terribly difficult decision, regarding the organic vegetable course. Life is a bitch for those upscale Americans who can possibly affect the national leadership.

Kindness and generosity do more than help people materially; they also stand in refutation of what beaten-down people expect to receive from their fellow man. It is experience, not talk or strategy that changes hearts and minds. We are not unchangeably hard-wired for greed and self-centeredness. Look around us at the cultures that are so much less self-centered, starting with all those Buddhist communities across the world and indigenous peoples. The American “take care of yourself first” attitude is simply programmed message to convince us that we are alone, unconnected, and that it is every man for himself. There is no such thing as every man for himself. Everything we possess, right down to our names and very breath has been given to us by others or with the assistance of others. Every penny we earn and every ease we enjoy has been with the unacknowledged assistance of others, a Pauline who once stood on a cannery line packing your applesauce, or a Wilf who hung the drywall in your new home, or someone like them.

Does American liberalism/progressivism have a moral core? A heart? A kingdom within? Time will tell. But the time is past for sympathy toward those who sleep with the Democratic party in that two-bed brothel called American party politics, then claim there were no other options but the party of least betrayal. Personally, I feel betrayed by the only party we ever had that reached out (even when it had to be dragged kicking and screaming by blacks and unions) to the kind of folks in the Shenandoah, the kind who raised me the best way they knew how – those poor beaten down, ill-educated, preyed upon Americans who find little community but that of churches and beer joints, and have resigned themselves to little or no justice on this earth, save that promised by God.

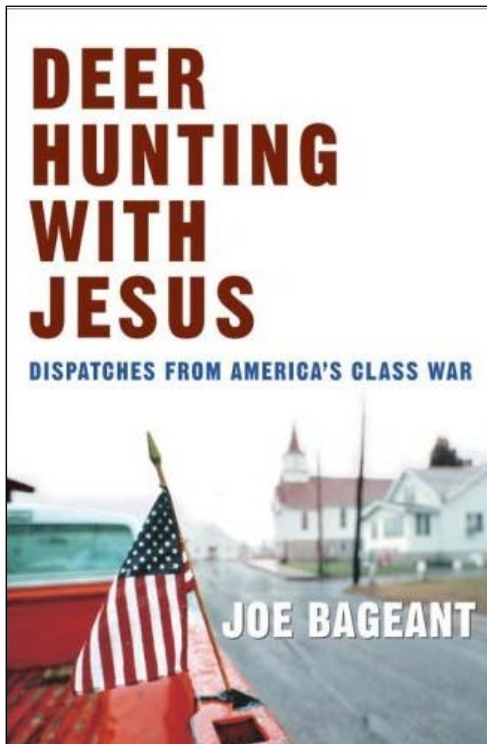
Stepping from the Shenandoah's dimness onto the pavement, the August sunlight plows you in the face like a Buick. Denney is coming down the street, face swollen and splotched in reaction to his treatments. Cars float along as if suspended by the heat. An angelic-featured young man, mixed race with budding red dreads, sits on the same nearby porch he sits on every day, unemployed and unemployable because he cannot read. The holy rollers at the Pentecostal mission are hollering and thrashing and singing about “The Old Ship of Zion.” The private ghost of a skinny kid yells

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*Paaaaaapers! Paaaaaapers!* And the doddering old boys at Johnny's are fixing to have waffles.

America – It's like Roy's songs, so cheap and so goddamned beautiful it makes you want to cry. Or sing. You never know which.

*Special thanks to Joe Guillory in the Louisiana state legislative offices, who is truly one of Roy's people.*



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"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**

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