

JOE BAGEANT

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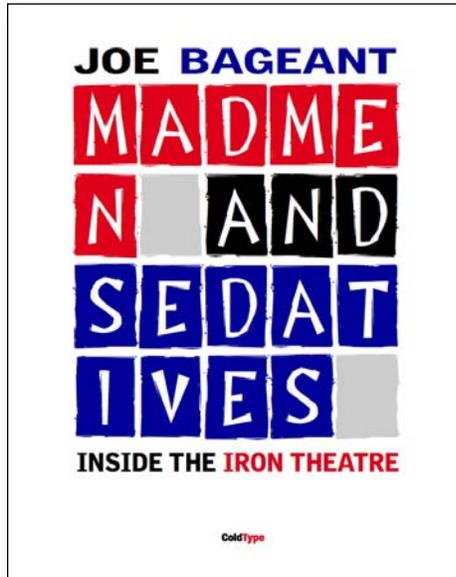
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INSIDE THE IRON THEATRE

ColdType



Joe Bageant is the author of the 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 www.joebageant.com.

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JOE BAGEANT: MADMEN AND SEDATIVES



nobody talks about it out loud, but a few million Americans are seriously doubting their sanity these days. Or having their sanity doubted. Or both. They seldom speak their minds because what is going on in there is a vision of society that conjures grave doubt, if not outright horror. It is the kind of stuff that will get your ass kicked off the island in a heartbeat. Nobody wants to hear it.

Yesterday I was gridlocked with my wife in traffic near the new mall, surrounded by cars full of monsters. Every redneck face and bloated or coifed middle class head in every vehicle was a grotesque, awful thing. In them you could see the meanest kind of white man ignorance, or smug middle class obliviousness, the kind that could care less if all the babies in Iraq were fried on spits in the Green Zone of Baghdad, so long as their nails get done on Saturdays. (Ah, you've seen the monsters too, haven't you!) There was that fleshy, overweight killer ugliness America seems to produce these day, the faces of a happy motoring people whose armies hold the world at gunpoint so they can stuff down pizza and check out this town's newest mall. Underneath the ugliness, there's a festering mean streak caused by frustration of knowing deep-down that government and commerce are corrupt – everybody knows this, but tolerates it for fear of losing their bling. The choice was ever thus (de Tocqueville noted its beginnings) but now has become a waking nightmare. One that brings up rage for some of us, rage that, if expressed in the wrong places and too often will get me thrown into the psyche ward if I tarry too much longer here in the land of the free.

“Lookie there,” I told my wife, who was driving, “A fucking car wash right over the spot where Nancy Hanks Lincoln’s mother was born! I remember when it was in a cornfield. And all these zombies who don’t give a crap about the bloody sand and sweatshops they create, just so they can buy a cheap skirt and drive cars worth 10

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years of wages in most of the world through a goddamned car wash! If every American died tomorrow, it is unarguable that the planet would be way more sustainable for not having to feed their greed!” On the inside I was bawling and screaming at the same time. I go off on these tirades increasingly these days. It is not good.

I could see by my wife’s face she was wondering if “getting Joe some help” was in order. Oh yes, getting some help – which in America means calling the authorities, in this case the psychiatric medical ones. Advanced technology and the skills of the medical cadre of the super-state offer its citizens wondrous ways to reach out to those in need of help. But it always comes down to prescribing drugs or possibly of even being locked up “for your own good,” until your ideations are more “normal.”

And so it is that many of us keep the rage inside as best we can, unwilling to destroy a job, or a marriage. And there are many of us, judging from the emails I receive, men and women alike, mostly over 40 with lots at stake, who fear being judged unstable by the well intentioned folks around us who never in their wildest thoughts would consider themselves good Germans. At any rate, who wants to be seen as unbalanced at the very moment in our lives when we unexpectedly find ourselves seeing Americans and America as they really are (and may have always been) for the first time? Not that it required insight. The sheer scale and pervasiveness of our national condition, plus decades of exposure, made it so damned obvious we could no longer escape it.

Regardless, inside me it gives rise to an alter ego I call THE SCREAMING MAN, who luckily for me, only screams inside my head. I’ve come to learn lately that plenty of other Americans have their own SCREAMING MAN and even see the same monsters I see in the traffic. (A big thank you to the L.A. Times reporter who was the first to tell me he saw the same creatures). The thought that so much of my readership is comprised of such folks is worrisome at times.

Once the monsters in the traffic reveal themselves, life can never be the same. We are left to go about doing all the ordinary things we always did, but with the building inexpressible moral outrage, living out our lives as rote actors in a theater of iron. Inside the iron theatre – a place surrounded by high walls of normalcy, where to discover a window to the outside is considered madness – the majority have apparently learned their scripts too well. So we are left in sitting in traffic jams to fester on our evil situation.

The great evils both past and present – the American genocide against the red

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Indian, My Lai and the uncounted others like it, Chairman Mao's purges, the Israeli war crimes against the Palestinians, the Muslim slaughter in Darfur, Bosnia, and most notably the Holocaust – were not carried out by sociopaths, but by ordinary people who believed in their states, their leaders and their gods. The machinist who made instruments for Nazi Germany felt no guilt. Nor does the anonymous mail-room employee in the Department of Homeland Security. I make a living editing military history magazines, thereby providing “pompous reaffirmations of a great past amid present mediocrity and immediate disorder,” as Marguerite Yourcenar put it. And right next door to my workplace Pakistani and Croatian programmers design death dealing aircraft circuitry for Curtis Wright. Yj6

et inside our florescent lit, air conditioned reality, there is not an ounce of guilt, much less a sense of accountability. Our work feels unquestionably ordinary, just as does the work of the traffic monsters, most of who work in Washington DC or the beltway around it.

(Vertigo, a taste of vomit in the throat, then . . .)

SCREAMING MAN HERE! AND I SAY FRY ALL THE PORK-FACED PUD-PUMPERS WITHIN A HUNDRED MILE RADIUS OF DC! BULLDOZE THEIR WINE-SOAKED CONDOS. RAZE THE BELTWAY AND SOW IT WITH DEPLETED URANIUM! WE NEED A REAL KILLER ON THE JOB. WHERE THE HELL IS THAT MURDERING GODDAM NAZI JEW SHARON WHEN YOU NEED HIM? GET ME MOKTADA AL-SADR ON THE PHONE!

Sheesh!

Oprah, LSD and the Lycra Micro Jukebox

How did we become so numb to the greatest moral issues of our time? Our time? Probably in human history, considering the irrevocable destruction of our ecosystem. Especially considering that 40 years ago they seemed to dominate the national arena . . . the Vietnam War, civil rights . . . A hell of a lot of wrong choices built the 200-year long road to where we now find ourselves, and I must admit that my generation did its share of the paving, laying down much of the roadbed during the Sixties. Despite much talk since then about the Sixties fight for moral justice, talk still easily launched by the pop of a chardonnay cork or the appearance of The Grateful Dead

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at the local arena, nearly to a man or woman, my generation, regardless of affluence, has traded principles for simple materialism. Assuming of course, they had any identifiable principles, which most didn't.

Perhaps it was only part of this country's ongoing struggle to accept successive waves of immigration, but the Sixties saw a push toward openness, toward diverse viewpoints and values. There has always been great pressure on our social and public institutions to be capable of accepting the diversity thronging at its doors, a pressure yielded to only when it looks like things are about to blow sky high: "OK niggers, you can ride in the front of the bus. Pssst! Jeeter, get out the fire hoses and turn the dogs loose." No institution is more pressed than the educational system. "Aw now the Mexicans want bilingual education!", which has been handed the responsibility of building character by parents, and charged by the state with creating obedient, functional citizens who can multiply at least to the sixth power, are willing to file income tax forms, and at least pretend they don't smoke pot. We are talking bare minimum standards here, although lately the multiplication standard has been dropped in favor of a willingness to be subjected to surveillance and mass body cavity searches at football games. In a nation where real education remains under suspicion by both the devoutly religious right, and the all-but-antireligious left, it was natural that school administrators and 10 million or so state teachers' college graduates – themselves products of the mediocrity characterizing our common denominator approach to democracy and education – would arrive the "morality is all a matter of opinion" solution. It was the only way out. And, besides, from their standpoint, it looked true.

(Hissss . . . crackle . . . can this truly be a signal through my fillings?)

AW, SHUT THE FUCK UP BAGEANT! NO MORAL ISSUE EVER GOT "EXPLORED" IN THIS COUNTRY. NEVER! THEY JUST GET EXPRESSED IN LOATHESOME SHORTHAND AT DISGUSTING LENGTH BETWEEN G.O.P. CRETINS WHO, IN THEIR HALF-WITTED SELF-DELUSIONS BELIEVE THAT RONALD REAGAN SHOOK HIS FIST AT THE BERLIN WALL AND ENDED THE COLD WAR . . . AND FAGGOT DEMOCRATS, A MISERABLE LOT NOW FORCED TO PRETEND THEIR VOTES WILL EVER BE COUNTED AGAIN!

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Godammit, I was trying to establish rational discourse here. Now where was I? Oh yes. The erosion of moral principles . . .

So now we find principles treated as mere opinion by most young people and their parents, call it diversity tolerance overshoot, and any answers posed to the great questions of our age neatly written off. Global warming? Just some scientists' opinion. The unjustness of our wars? More opinion. Inequity in society? In whose opinion? Wastefulness of our lifestyle? A matter of opinion.

Over the course of two generations of this a predictable thing happened. Because the first generation avoided the questions, the second one never learned that they could be asked. The atmosphere could not be riper for pure triumphant consumer capitalism and its inherent militarism (Somebody has to clear the way for Wal-Mart democracy.) If there are no overarching public moral or intellectual questions, then the only remaining questions are material ones: Which is best? The iPod or the RCA Lybra Micro Jukebox? Headphones, cell phones and polyphonic ringtones, everyone is plugged into the white noise of pure commerce. It's the new "Turn on, tune in, and drop out." I liked the old version better. Used appropriately, LSD posed the great questions. And sometimes highlighted a few answers, too.

But it doesn't take a psychedelic experience to pursue the kind of truth inherent to fleshly human existence, the kind that seeks justice from within our bones. In fact, it takes effort to avoid it. I've never seen a culture or human being that did not have an inherent sense of justice, an innate desire for balance. Most consider this to be the spiritual side of man, if they consider it at all. Most do not. A huge portion of the world is commodity addicted, while another portion is simply looking for a warm dry spot in which to shit or lay down and die. There is not much room for contemplation of the finer points of existence in either instance. Whatever the case, the American lack of even minimal spiritual observance inducted us into the Empire's cast of featureless players inside the iron theater. Nobody needs answers to meaningful questions that are never asked, or dare not be asked.

Some days however, change does seem to be afoot, as it certainly must be, given that change is the world's only constant. A majority of Americans now disapprove of the war in Iraq. Just three years ago when I started writing from this town's taverns and churches, working people therein absolutely loved George Bush. Now they have returned to their normal state of political apathy, seldom speaking of Bush, but with one difference – they no longer approve of his war, and express disapproval general-

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ly in the form of grumbling. They grumble because television has given them permission to do so, through its constant touting of polling results expressing “dissatisfaction” with the war. Being “dissatisfied” with something, a war in this case, is more in accordance with their programming as consumers, not citizens. They will never get permission to be really pissed off, much less pissed off enough to burn anything down.

Television polls never specifically count the outraged and the heartbroken, thus reducing our deepest emotions, once more, to mere opinion in another opinion poll. Outrage is impermissible, except for the pretend outrage of Crossfire, etc, which has entertainment value, thus profitability. Which is why the majority of Americans know little about Cindy Sheehan. Sorry to say that here in lefty blogdom, but it’s true. Cindy Sheehan has never been on Oprah.

When and if Sheehan ever is on Oprah, we will know we have won regarding the war in Iraq. We will have won if your standard for victory is acknowledgment by the high priestess of emotional vapidty and Barnes and Noble sales, talked to by a woman who uses her child rape as a credential. In her particular celebrity delusion, she considers herself the emotional caretaker of the nation, the Martha Stewart of the soul. Lusting for proximity of your cause to celebrity may be a gratifying short term antidote, but lusting for universal justice is the ultimate cure.

But even assuming getting within four feet of Oprah Winfrey constitutes victory, we will have won far too late for the already dead on both sides. Vietnam proved that the Empire’s wars are easier to stop than the overall trajectory of national hubris and folly. Winning is stopping wars before they start, or creating a society wherein war is the last resort, not a casual preemptive option. As for the growing rejection of the war, copping to the obvious in the face of defeat, then claiming moral high ground after we have scorched it and everyone on it, well, that’s no victory at all.

Which leaves me here to fester on celebrity and moral victory under the looming possibility of forced medication by the state. HmMMM . . .

Where the hell are you Aldous Huxley?

So are they gonna medicate me and you or what? Surely I must have some time left before that happens. And if they don’t, then I’ll have to do it myself anyway. You cannot win in the Iron Theater. What its producers and directors want to happen is destined to happen. They are always in control. And when it comes to control, you

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can't beat the good ole US pharmaceutical industry, which has clearly met the challenge of adult rage and despair, and is now dopping down the kids before they even hit puberty. Over the past six years mental health drugs prescribed to children have jumped 550%. Recently the NFC (New Freedom Commission on Mental Health) recommended the mandatory mental health screening for 100% of America's school children and drug treatment for all children "judged to be in need of drugs." Hell, every kid in the whole damned country needs drugs, if only to face their future in the global gulag being constructed for them.

Godammit, Huxley, you saw it coming, didn't you? But I don't think it will be nearly as much fun as your grim vision. You held out the possibility of science perfecting bread and circuse – Soma. Now THAT was an idea, bud! Three brands of pharmacological reality: Technicolor Soma, a pleasant hallucinogen; Soma medium, a Valium-like tranquilizer; and El Crusho black gold, the heavy sleeping pill. And for the rugged freedom loving individualist, you offered those tropical islands offshore. There was really nothing coercive about it all. If the corpocracy had listened to you Hux, about how to do oppression the right way, I'd be curled up in the lap of Halliburton right now, gurgling happily. I have nothing against state-controlled euphoria if they don't skimp on the euphies. By the way Hux, can I do the Technicolor on the Island? Or will I be kicked off that one too?

Anyway, we seem to be truly dicked now. Man the machine-making monkey is so proud of the machines he has created he now pushes toward the machining of human nature itself. Why not? It was always so damned unpredictable. So yes, by dammit, let's do 'er! Let the scientific and economic machinery we have created remake us in its own likeness. Let there be technology without wisdom and efficiency without human benefit. Let there be one blissful nation of highly medicated sleepwalkers in a scientific hell that, if you get doped up enough, feels like paradise.

A visitation from Diogenes and Stonewall Jackson

So what about that rage, huh? My own personal experiences tell me that, being part of human nature, it's also unpredictable stuff. Tonight I went to a dinner party given by a freedom-hearted couple, the female half of which is probably the most intellectually courageous woman in town. I can't know that with certainty because even the most liberal people in this Southern burgh would never dare to invite me to dinner.

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Word has gotten around.

Two hours into the dinner party, I did a bad thing. I called a nice-enough but gutless, apolitical guest, “one more ignorant motherfucking American wanting respect for his self-imposed blindness,” adding that “Everything is not just an opinion, you know.” My good wife stood horrified. (Yes, there was alcohol involved.) Now, I know I am not the judge of that man’s days, and that he has the right to his opinion or non-opinion. But some days I cannot find even the dinner party pretense of respect for American denial, and this was one of those days.

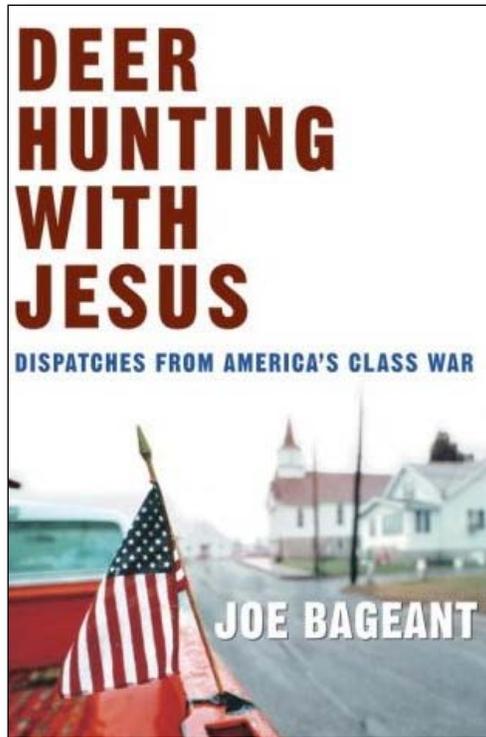
By way of rationalization, I tell myself that if Diogenes of Sinope could live under a tub and take shots at the entire Greek world, then I am entitled to a snootful and an occasional outburst, despite the disparity between my talents and the long dead old Greek’s. It’s either that, or the deer rifle and water tower solution. Or the cheap polemics you are now suffering. All of which is more bullshit, but it is the best I can do at the moment to rationalize bad behavior.

It is 11 pm, after the dinner party, and I sit in this muggy summer darkness on a bench in front of the Stonewall Jackson Headquarters Museum, located right behind my house.

Stonewall Jackson sat on his horse and sucked on lemons while he calmly managed the slaughter of thousands. I should probably take up lemons instead of gin. But at least I am guilty of mere stupidity, not slaughter. Tomorrow I will repent. Maybe. Depends upon whether anyone with legal authority finally decides I need help. Meanwhile, any kind of resistance, even the stupidest sort waged against fools, gives relief on a hot night inside the iron theater.

This anger will all come out in the morning as prose. Most likely, bad prose. (It did and you are reading it now.) But at least it will be out. Hell, there is only the world at stake.

*This essay is for Al Aronowitz, “The Blacklisted Journalist,” (1928-2005).
A friend and mentor in art.*



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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

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