

JOE BAGEANT

**LAFAYETTE
PARK
BLUES**

**HOW COULD A COUNTRY THAT EMBRACED
THE IDEALISM AND LIBERATION OF THE
SIXTIES TRANSFORM INTO AN ICON OF
GLOBAL AGGRESSION AND OPPRESSION?**

JOE BAGEANT
LAFAYETTE
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In the late 1960s I used to sit in Lafayette Park across from the White House, have spring picnics on the benches there with hippie girlfriends, reading Rimbaud, while waiting for the Robert Rauschenberg exhibit to open at the Corcoran Museum down the street. Usually there would be protesters across Pennsylvania Avenue, sometimes chained to the White House gate, a Buddhist monk or an anti-war group or mothers against whatever. Those were freer times. I know they were freer because I was there, I felt it and can remember it, as do millions of other Americans my age. So when we now look at the White House with its steel wire, concrete barricades, police dogs and snipers posted on rooftops we cannot help but ask ourselves: What the hell has happened to my country? Who imposed this national lockdown?

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Admittedly, we were just dumb artsy kids in those Lafayette Park days, youthful dreamers who couldn't imagine ever being thirty years old (much less fifty eight!) And in an age when you could smoke a joint in the White House restrooms during a tour, we certainly never imagined a time when special enclosures for public dissenters would be given the authoritarian state term 'Free Speech Zones'. I never thought I would hear our government brand the liberalism of Jefferson as terrorism, never imagined an election could be successfully rigged in this country, and never thought I'd see the Supreme Court back a junta. I never thought I would see three percent of our citizens pulling hard time in a vast complex of prisons. I never thought I would see 911. But most frightening has been watching Americans accept all this in such Orwellian fashion. Which is what one has to call it because our national behavior is way beyond anything that could be called ordinary denial.

How in the hell did those far right nutjobs pull this off? Well, for starters they had to erase public memory of those freer times. So they ginned up the Heritage Foundation and the Rand Institute's lie machines in a fashion that would make Joe Stalin and Kim Il Sun proud. One of the first lies they had to sell (in what are now being called the culture wars) was that freedom equals danger and charity equals communism. After their success in the 1994 elections, right-wing propagandists began identifying the Sixties generation as a 'counterculture' and as the source of all American social rot. When it came to this rank howl, the loudest dog in the pen was history professor Newt Gingrich, who managed to hallucinate a version of the Sixties in which 'countercultural McGoverniks' were somehow leftist agents in cahoots with The Great Society to tear down Western civilization. Oh what a colorful hallucination! Counterculture types were supposedly saving up gobs of spit for Vietnam vets (though how it could be done, given the prevalent marijuana 'cottonmouth' of the times is beyond me) and welcoming the commie hordes ashore at the San Francisco docks. And it was somehow all Dr. Spock's fault.

According to the neocons, this malignant counterculture started festering on the ass of the republic in 1965 and ended when the Republican Revolution lanced it in 1994. People like Robert Bork and Gingrich had best sellers on the theme. Today this rank lie has become a trope, and is accepted as social history by a new generation. Nevertheless, here we are forty years later and the issues confronted by the Sixties counterculture still haunt us. Free speech, the right to control one's own body and consciousness, the right to be unpatriotic, anti-nationalistic and as obstreperous as we choose to be so long as no one gets hurt.

Even the best writers, people such as Thomas Frank, miss this animating spirit of the era. Frank describes it solely as a youth marketing phenomenon, and the Sixties was that too. But commerce was not the soul of the movement, which was as much spiritual as political. Or, as my crotchety old friend, the blacklisted writer Al Aronsky

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says, 'The fact that public nudism, marijuana smoking, advanced bisexuality, unmailable poetry, wino drunkenness, unconsecrated marriage... can be termed a religious quest might come as a surprise to a public that swears it doesn't partake of these joys.' However, one must forgive Franks missing such a point since, as he admits in his book, he was a young Republican, which gave him great insight into the Republican takeover of Kansas (*What's Wrong With Kansas?* Thomas Frank) but is a distinct disadvantage in understanding any kind of alternative culture. Much as I hate the cliché, *you had to be there*, Tom. Put simply, few generations ever loved being self-realizing Americans more. And surely no generation ever had more goddam fun doing it.

That Sixties vision is gone from society, though it still inspires some in my generation who love this nation enough to resist its lesser angels. Not a majority – we were never a majority – but nevertheless many. There was nothing wrong with attempting to bring world peace and personal freedom and a joyful cosmology. In fact, the counterculture's aspirations were a lesser extension of its parents' aspirations, considering that at the end of World War Two 65% of Americans wanted 'one world government' and all nuclear weapons under the management of the United Nations! Pacifists Bertrand Russell and Norman Thomas were right all their lives and are still right in death: a predatory corporate political culture's dependence upon war is antithetical to everything human. Laugh if you want, but many made commitments to this which involved risk and sacrifice and anyone who was serious in that movement can name friends who were ruined or died in the process. But they will also tell you it was the noblest public thing they ever did.

ABOVE THE FOAMING DRECK

SCREAMING MAN VOLUNTEERS HIS SERVICES TO PERSONALLY DISARM THOSE NOSE-PICKING NEOCON SPAWN OF PIG JISM... AND DE-NUT THEM LIKE THE FAT, BRAYING LITTLE FASCIST BEASTS THEY ARE. PEEL THEIR ARYAN NATIONS TATTOOS FROM THEIR NAKED BODIES WITH A SET OF ELECTRIFIED PLIERS. AND WHEN I DO, LADY LIBERTY THROW HER TORCH IN THE AIR, FLING UP HER SKIRT AND SCREAM: 'FREE AT LAST... THANK GOD ALMIGHTY... SOMEBODY ROLL ME A GODDAM JOINT!'

– *Leftist Internet denizen called SCREAMING MAN*

As the above posting illustrates, it is difficult, to say the least, for the real left to get the public's attention these days, what with all the goose stepping and God, guns and oil rhetoric filling the public plaza. Hell, half a million demonstrators for women's

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rights in Washington D.C. failed to get even local television coverage, which gives some notion of the pitch and fervor of our war crazed republic. It is doubtful we could get any leftist concept whatsoever across to the public.

Especially if that idea requires genuine literacy. The American mindscape has become nasty intellectual terrain since the Sixties, when most new concepts were transferred through books. According to the Book Industry Study Group, less than half of American adults read books – at all. Even then, half of the top sellers are celebrity-based ga-ga stuff, mediocre fiction such as *The Da Vinci Code*, or the rants of folks like Ann Coulter, oh prancing princess of the GOP vomitorium. (Or vapid liberal comfort food such as Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men*.) You are probably reading some book right now and I am writing one, but neither of us is expecting to see a Jean-Paul Sartre revival anytime soon. Not in a nation where a girl eating two feet of fried horse anus on reality TV commands the awe of millions. Our national taste runs toward idiopathic grotesques, the Coulters, Limbaughs and Liddys. Ann Coulter can call for the jailing of liberals and the treason trial of poor old Jimmy Carter to the cheers of millions. To her credit, she was perceptive enough to understand that the conservative hatefulness ceiling had risen substantially, and with a tad more goosing it would produce best sellers – also that the GOP wanted badly to prove that Republicans could show some fine leg, too.

Saner people try to write it all off as the far right's rabid media moment, or quick-buck publishing, assuring themselves no one takes such crap seriously. I can tell you that a stunning number of people I know are convinced that Coulter's hysterical recommendations are exactly what needs to be done. And they will do it too, given the opportunity. Chances are that the reader thinks this I am being hyperbolic. So be it. But as I keep telling my liberal urban friends: 'It's a lot dumber and meaner out here in the heartland than you believe.' The left could send two million protesters to New York tomorrow and the heartland's response to the news would be: 'Honey, come quick! They've got a million tree huggin' homos in a free speech cage in New York!' I live amid some of the most dangerous voters in America, neocon snake handling Southerners, and I know these people and I know what it says about part of America. It says that the kinder, gentler Republican era of Newt Gingrich is far behind us.

The Republican revolution is at full throttle now and if you get down on all fours and look at the world like a Republican, you will see that we have never been more successful as a nation. Five percent of our citizens are either in prison or on parole. We now have 6,000 bases in 130 countries. I am told that is about 4,000 more full installations than the Roman Empire staffed with legions at its zenith. There is scarcely a citizen in this militaristic economy of ours that does not have a stake in providing bullets or Snickers bars, CD players, cell phones, depleted uranium shells or some unimaginable death-dealing technology to the outposts of the empire. What

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cannot be accomplished with bribes and threats in the United Nations gets done with the fist, either by our own or by putting weapons in someone else's. Or by offering some democratically elected leftist leader suffering under the obscene notion that people deserve enough daily bread to shit regularly. We remain quite true to our roots as homicidal white Euro-trash hog thieves, despite the comforting national lies regarding liberation and furthering democracy.

Speaking of lies since and about the Sixties, one of the most pervasive is that all activists of the counterculture grew into fat, happy yuppies. I know dozens who've remained true to their beliefs at great personal cost to their lives and families... and now teach in tribal schools, work in social services, clinics, etc. They are making the world better and could do more given the chance. The trouble is, they have no voice and are effectively kept out of politics because of their pasts, kept from running for office by things like youthful drug possession charges, etc. But we are starting to see some of their children enter the arena... children who I know are sharers of the dream. It may well be that the best in my generation inadvertently pulled off a coup by simply loving their kids and sharing their hopes with them. If the coldest among us can impart their bitter vision to their children, why can't the poets among us do the same? You in the generation that came of age in the 80s and 90s will have to bring new vision. What a line of bullshit! Sounds like a politician. My god a'mighty! You confront a worse specter than we ever did. You were born into a hardening police state and have lived your lives inside the invisible bars of a corporate military consumer society. Your government hands over your nation's coffers to the feasting rich and plays shell games with the coffins of your brothers killed at a voracious free market's far flung edges. And if you point any of these things out you will be called 'over the edge'. Love it or leave it, or stay and suffer the consequences. It's not just you kid. All of us manage to love America for deeper philosophical reasons feel like battered lovers these days.

Still, on the Internet – which is uniquely yours – some undefined new thing is stirring. There is the scent of that good old time freedom-loving chaos. A challenge to authority and the state-enforced social lie, voices rising above the foaming dreck. And they increase daily. Of course this anti-authoritarian challenge seems like quite a stir to those passionately involved, but at this point most Americans have no notion of it yet and, and besides us, only the Department of Homeland Security is listening in on the conversation with any interest.

REPUBLIC OF LOVE AND FEAR

An informed polity needs information, and Americans do care about the facts. We can give you the basketball odds, tell you how many carbs are in a Sarah Lee cheese-cake and name the characters in 'Schrek'. Forget insignificant ones such as that 15,000

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civilians were killed in the US attack and occupation of Iraq. This is not important, which is why the media never informed us of it. Then too, dead sand monkeys do not register in the American conscience as anything to grieve over. They are the same color and speak the same jabber language as the freaks who crashed those airliners. Right? America's racist colonial underpinning is still alive and kicking; it just doesn't wear sheets and hoods anymore. It wears Chinese slave labor made garments and burns high test in its riding lawn mowers and works one full month a year just to pay for its imperial armies.

This has not been a good month. We had a death in my family and I had one of those late-life age brushes with cancer. It's been a curious time of love and fear at home and as a citizen. Love and fear both well describe what some of us feel these days in the nation of the Great Dream – the republic putatively sprung full bloom from the womb of the Enlightenment. Only America could have dreamed up a people such as you and me, so funny, brave, obese, well-meaning, oblivious and full of shit. Only America could have fattened us on its alleged idealism, then declared the end of the Enlightenment and ordered us to Buy or Die, holding the entire world at gunpoint so we could eat fried chicken in the comfort of our SUVs while listening to Hood Hop on quad CD/MP3 in-car stereo. Only America could have created this scientifically orchestrated consumption-based hell that calls itself paradise.

America: When we first stepped onto this playground of the national soul together, I truly believed you were not a bully, that you were the protector of queers and thick-tongued immigrants and laboring spiritual hoboes like me. I have tossed down your dreams straight from the bottle with no chaser, then bought a round for the house, because this is the goddam land of the free where even a redneck boy from Virginia can dream the dreams of bards, call himself a writer then walk away from dark ancestral ghosts to actually become one.

I believed it all, America. And I still fall for it if I let my guard down. just like the abused wife who believes she will not be punched again for that thousand and first time. All the neighbors – whole nations – believed in you too, despite the muffled screams of the black slave and the Red Indian coming from within your own house. But now you are lurking on the neighbors' porches smelling of the halls of Abu Ghraib and gun grease and there are no cops to call because you ARE the cops, so they are going to break down the doors and cut your balls off.

I can't sleep at nights and don't you pretend that you are asleep. Talk to me! You are going to have to say you love your native son or this whole terrible ecstatic thing of ours is over. You have changed over the many years we have been writhing together in this little power struggle of yours and mine – the one between little guy liberty and big authority. Now you have become the police court judge of my days

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and I dare not even leave your house for a quart of milk or a look at the stars. It's too late for counseling. You have broken my heart one too many times. Cracked one too many ribs.

Time is short. Dawn will bring nothing good, I promise you.

Speak to me like you used to.

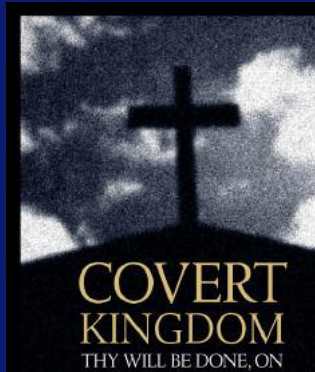
Right now.

Or it's over.

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JOE BAGEANT

**SON OF A
LABORING
GOD** Gettin'
down
and
dumb
at
Burt's
Tavern

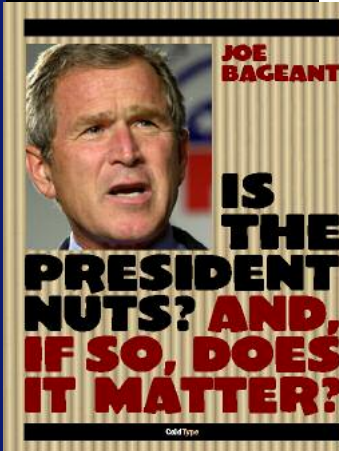


**IN THE
DOMINION
OF THE
LEASH**

**DRIVING ON THE
BONES OF GOD**



You and I
may get
smoked, but
the fat cats
will still dine
on peacock



**SLEEPWALKING
TO DISASTER**

**Beware
of DOG** In the war
on terror,
FBI agents
at Norfolk,
Virginia, airport took
anal swabs from a
mechanical farting dog
to make sure it didn't



JOE BAGEANT
**Hung
Over
In The
End
Times**

If liberal society is to survive
the rise of the Godwacks,
we need to start by calling
them what they are



JOE BAGEANT
**DINING
WITH
THE
RHINOS**

*"If American politics are a penitentiary, then that
swing has been a mighty damned short one of late,
somewhere between corporate feudalism abroad,
and a domestic form in which rhinos happily play
video games and watch football while their kids
charge around on the ever-expanding rhino empire's
toes for oil and turf and more slave labor"*

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