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Good ol' boys off song

November 8, 2008

Joe Bageant railed against George Bush but insists Barack Obama is a long way from securing Redneckville. Nigel Bowen gave him a call.

If rednecks had philosopher kings, Joe

Bageant would be a shoo-in for the throne. When the *Herald* calls, it's 6.30 on election night and the author of *Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War* is lamenting the lack of political buzz in his home town of Winchester, Virginia.

"I thought people would be a little more excited." Bageant says. It's election night but politics is not the main topic of conversation at the bar. "Though one guy said to me, 'I'm so damn mad at George Bush, I'm going to vote for a nigger'."

It's from this sort of unvarnished exchange that Bageant fashioned *Deer Hunting With Jesus*, his best-selling attempt to explain to a middle-class readership the compulsion of America's white underclass to "use the voting booth as an instrument of self-flagellation".

In about an hour it will be clear Virginia has gone Democrat for the first time since Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1964, but for now Bageant is presciently holding forth without having perused so much as a single exit poll. "I think Obama's people did reach out to the white working class here. It was the smartest damn campaign I've seen in my life - thorough, machine-like, no waste of money. And they had lots of money. I think there were 50 offices in the state, 200 workers and \$50 million spent. I had four visits and six phone calls from Obama's campaign workers telling me to vote, and vote early."

Nonetheless, Bageant is unconvinced The One has won over his redneck kin - that 30 per cent of Americans who are white, working class, minimally educated and into the "sports and beer aesthetic".

"Redneck is a culture," Bageant drawls, "not a place. These days many rednecks live in the suburbs because that's where the housing and jobs are. Redneck culture tends to be religious, patriotic and conservative."

Bageant admits it's also racist but insists redneck attitudes are more complex than condescending liberals allow for.

"Racism is there. But it is not the biggest thing. Well, maybe it is the biggest thing. It depends where you are. I always joke that every redneck has got a couple of black nieces and nephews. I know I have two. We've worked with them for 30 years and I don't know a redneck bar in town that doesn't have a few black regulars.

"But that doesn't mean the problem is solved. I met so many conservative working class people who said they'd vote for Hillary [Clinton] but they won't vote for Obama. And that

comes down to her being white."

The Republicans simply fed them the lines about inexperience and so on that they needed to hide their racism.

Clearly some white working poor, especially in crucial, once safely Republican states such as Virginia, were "so damn mad" they voted Democrat for the first time or avoided the ballot. But that doesn't mean they won't mobilise for another Republican contender, possibly the redneck pin-up girl Sarah Palin, four years on.

Despite uplifting gusts of misty-eyed rhetoric, not least the victory speech, suggesting Obama exploded and healed the racial divide, the voting shows it just ain't so.

Bageant's fellow Virginians voted in a white Democrat governor with far greater enthusiasm than they displayed towards the president-elect. Most of the redneck heartland of the Midwest and Deep South was solidly behind John McCain. Indeed, most Caucasians opted for him.

North Carolina's Governor, Michael Easley, a white Democrat, argues that difficult economic times make "the price of prejudice ... just a little bit too high. They're saying, 'We don't care what your race is, if you can make things better, we're for you'."

It would be nice to think so. But no matter how severe the economic downturn, or how adroitly Obama deals with it, Bageant isn't expecting poor whites to return anytime soon to a Democratic Party they feel betrayed and abandoned them with its embrace of the civil rights movement.

Working class votes "conservative because every time change comes it is bad for them", Bageant says. "Are they stupid? Yes, but they've been made stupid. A segment of the population has been left to rot - no education, no health care, no decent wages, no job security. There is anger out there, but it is inchoate anger.

"You could make a pretty good argument that rednecks are incapable of insight due to conditioning. The things progressives offer, we rednecks are trained from first grade to see as bad. Unions? That means gangsters and criminals. Welfare? That's the dirtiest word in the whole world - it means a black crack addict. The top 1 per cent making as much money as the bottom 50 per cent? Well, rich people deserve what they got because they worked harder."

Perhaps it's for the best that redneck hopes for the new era are so low. Bageant believes Obama is going to find it impossible to meet his supporters' expectations.

"There will be some reversal of the things that Bush took away from us - privacy, habeas corpus, due process."

Obama, says Bageant, is "not trigger-happy and the rest of the world likes him. That's a good start after the last eight years. But it doesn't matter if Obama is carried into the White House by Jesus Christ and a five-piece band; he won't be able to do anything because (a) the

country is incredibly broke and (b) the Congress is still bought and sold. Higher education and health care are for-profit businesses and, with the price they are, you can't just say, 'Well, we're just going to pay for everyone to have it'.

"Obama would have to get Congress to go along with what he wants to do and they don't really want to do it - not even the Democrats. They're funded by the same corporations as the Republicans; they just get less money."

So it will be business as usual under the soaring orator who raised hopes for change?

"Democrats lost touch with working people 30 years ago," Bageant says. "If the Democrats are smart, they'll spend the next four years working it, trying to win over hearts and minds. The one thing that connects everyone, be it a liberal college professor or a conservative roofer, is a sense of justice.

"You can reach working-class people through that sense of justice. Alliances can be made. But I think the white working class will continue to be neglected and that will come back to bite them on the ass next time."

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