

# Let Them Eat War

By Arlie Hochschild

George W. Bush is sinking in the polls, but a few beats on the war drum could reverse that trend and re-elect him in 2004. Ironically, the sector of American society now poised to keep him in the White House is the one which stands to lose the most from virtually all of his policies -- blue-collar men. A full 49% of them and 38% percent of blue-collar women told a January 2003 Roper poll they would vote for Bush in 2004. (1)

In fact, blue-collar workers were more pro-Bush than professionals and managers among whom only 40% of men and 32% of women, when polled, favor him; that is, people who reported to Roper such occupations as painter, furniture mover, waitress, and sewer repairman were more likely to be for our pro-big business president than people with occupations like doctor, attorney, CPA or property manager. High-school graduates and dropouts were more pro-Bush (41%) than people with graduate degrees (36%). And people with family incomes of \$30,000 or less were no more opposed to Bush than those with incomes of \$75,000 or more. (2)

We should think about this. The blue-collar vote is huge. Skilled and semi-skilled manual jobs are on the decline, of course, but if we count as blue-collar those workers without a college degree, as Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers do in their book *Why the White Working Class Still Matters*, then blue-collar voters represent 55% of all voters. They are, the authors note, the real swing vote in America. "Their loyalties shift the most from election to election and in so doing determine the winners in American politics."(3)

This fact has not been lost on Republican strategists who are now targeting right-leaning blue-collar men, or as they call them, "Nascar Dads." These are, reporter Liz Clarke of the *Washington Post* tells us, "lower or middle-class men who once voted Democratic but who now favor Republicans."(4) Nascar Dads, commentator Bill Decker adds, are likely to be racing-car fans, live in rural areas, and have voted for Bush in 2000. Bush is giving special attention to steelworkers, autoworkers, carpenters and other building-trades workers, according to Richard Dunham and Aaron Bernstein of *Business Week*, and finding common cause on such issues as placing tariffs on imported steel and offering tax breaks on pensions.

We can certainly understand why Bush wants blue-collar voters. But why would a near majority of blue-collar voters still want Bush? Millionaires, billionaires for Bush, well, sure; he's their man. But why pipe fitters and cafeteria workers? Some are drawn to his pro-marriage, pro-church, pro-gun stands, but could those issues override a voter's economic self-interest?

Let's consider the situation. Since Bush took office in 2000, the U.S. has lost 4.9 million jobs, (2.5 million net), the vast majority of them in manufacturing. (5)

While this cannot be blamed entirely on Bush, his bleed-'em-dry approach to the non-Pentagon parts of the government has led him to do nothing to help blue-collar workers learn new trades, find affordable housing, or help their children go to college. The loosening of Occupational Health and Safety Administration regulations has made plants less safe. Bush's agricultural policies favor agribusiness and have put many small and medium-sized farms into bankruptcy. His tax cuts are creating state budget shortfalls, which will hit the public schools blue-collar children go to, and erode what services they now get. He has put industrialists in his environmental posts, so that the air and water will grow dirtier. His administration's disregard for the severe understaffing of America's nursing homes means worse care for the elderly parents of the Nascar Dad as they live out their last days. His invasion of Iraq has sent blue-collar children and relatives to the front. Indeed, his entire tap-the-hornets'-nest foreign policy has made the U.S. arguably less secure than it was before he took office. Indeed, a recent series of polls revealed that most people around the world believe him to be a greater danger than Osama Bin Laden. Many blue-collar voters know at least some of this already. So why are so many of them pro-Bush anyway?

### **Wondering about the Nascar Dad**

Among blue-collar voters, more men than women favor Bush, so we can ask what's going on with the men. It might seem that their pocketbooks say one thing, their votes another, but could it be that, by some good fortune, blue-collar men are actually better off than we imagine? No, that can't be it. About a fifth of them had household incomes of \$30,000 or less; 4 in 10 between \$30,000 and \$75,000; and 4 in 10 \$75,000 or more. Among the poorest blue-collar families (with household incomes of \$30,000 or less) a full 44 % were pro-Bush. Perhaps even more strikingly, \$75,000-plus Nascar Dads are more likely to favor Bush than their income-counterparts who hold professional and managerial jobs.

Even if poor blue-collar men were pro-Bush in general, we might at least assume that they would oppose Bush's massive program of tax cuts if they thought it favored the rich? If we did, then we'd be wrong again. "Do you think this tax plan benefits mainly the rich or benefits everyone?" Roper interviewers asked. Among blue-collar men who answered, "Yes, it benefits mainly the rich," 56% percent nonetheless favored the plan. (6) Among blue-collar men with \$30,000 or less who answered "yes" and who believed that yes, this tax cut "benefits mainly the rich," a full 53 % favored it. This far exceeds the 35% of people who make \$75,000 or more, knew the tax cut favored the rich, and still supported it.

So, what's going on? Should we throw out the classic Clinton-era explanation for how we all vote: "It's the economy, stupid"? (7) Not right away. Maybe the blue-collar man who favors that tax cut is thinking "the economy stupid" but only in the short term. He badly needs even the small amounts of money he'll get from a tax cut to repair his car or contribute to the rent. But then many working-class men labor decade after decade at difficult jobs to secure a future for their children. So if they think long term as a way of life, why are they thinking short-term when it comes to their vote?

One possibility is that the Nascar Dad is not well informed; that indeed, like the rest of us, he's been duped. For example, he may have fallen for the Karl Rove-inspired bandwagon effect. "Bush is unbeatable," he hears, or "Bush has a \$200,000,000 re-election fund. Get with the winner." It makes you a winner too, he feels. This might account for some blue-collar Bush support, but it doesn't explain why the Nascar Dad would be more likely to be taken in by the bandwagon effect than the professional or managerial dad. Anyway, most blue-collar men would seem to be no less likely than anyone else to vote their conscience, regardless of whom they think will win, and that's not even counting those who root for the underdog as a matter of principle.

But another kind of manipulation could be going on. A certain amount of crucial information has gone missing in the Bush years. As has recently become clear, information that would be of great interest to the Nascar Dad has been withheld. With jobs disappearing at a staggering rate, the Bureau of Labor Statistics ended its Mass Layoff Tracking Study on Christmas Eve of 2002, thanks to this administration. And although Congressional Democrats managed to get funding for the study restored in February of 2003, the loss of 614,167 jobs in those two months was unannounced.(8)

Conveying the truth in a misleading manner is, of course, another way of manipulating people. As the linguist George Lakoff astutely observes, the term "tax relief" slyly invites us to imagine taxes as an affliction and those who propose them as villains. If we add in such distortions to the suppression of vital information, the Nascar Dad who listens to Rush Limbaugh on the commute home, turns on Fox News at dinner, and is too tired after working overtime to catch more than the headlines is perhaps a man being exposed to only one side of the political story.

But then Nascar Dad could always turn the radio dial. He could do a google search on job loss on his kid's computer. He could talk to his union buddies -- if he's one of the 12% who are still unionized -- or to his slightly more liberal wife. It could be he knows perfectly well that he's being lied to, but believes people are usually being lied to, and that Bush is, in this respect, still the better of two evils. But how could that be?

Maybe it's because Bush fits an underlying recipe for the kind of confident, authoritative father figure such dads believe should run the ship of state as they believe a man should run a family. Republican rhetoric may appeal to the blue-collar man, Lakoff suggests, because we tend to match our view of good politics with our image of a good family. The appeal of any political leader, he believes, lies in the way he matches our images of the father in the ideal family.(9) There are two main pictures of such an ideal American family, Lakoff argues. According to a "strict father family" model, dad should provide for the family, control mom, and use discipline to teach his children how to survive in a competitive and hostile world. Those who advocate the strict father model, Lakoff reasons, favor a "strict father" kind of government. If an administration fits this model, it supports the family (by maximizing overall wealth). It protects the

family from harm (by building up the military). It raises the children to be self-reliant and obedient (by fostering citizens who ask for little and speak when spoken to). The match-up here is, of course, to Bush Republicans.

Then there is the "nurturing parent family" model in which parents don't simply control their children but encourage their development. The government equivalent would be offering services to the citizenry, funding education, health, and welfare, and emphasizing diplomacy on a global stage.) The core values here are empathy and responsibility, not control and discipline and the match up is to the pro-public sector Dean/Kucinich Democrats. Studies have shown that blue-collar ideals are closer to the strict father than to the nurturing parent model. But that's been true for a very long time, while the blue-collar vote sometimes goes left as in the 1930s, and sometimes goes right as it's doing now. So we can't simply pin the pro-Bush Nascar Dad vote on a sudden change in blue-collar family ideals.

### **Appealing to the "forgotten American"**

Maybe, however, something deeper is going on, which has so far permitted Bush's flag-waving and cowboy-boot-strutting to trump issues of job security, wages, safety, and health -- and even, in the case of Bush's threats of further war -- life itself. In an essay, "The White Man Unburdened," in a recent *New York Review of Books*, Norman Mailer recently argued that the war in Iraq returned to white males a lost sense of mastery, offering them a feeling of revenge for imagined wrongs, and a sense of psychic rejuvenation."<sup>(10)</sup> In the last thirty years, white men have taken a drubbing, he notes, especially the three quarters of them who lack college degrees. Between 1979 and 1999, for example, real wages for male high-school graduates dropped 24%. In addition, Mailer notes, white working class men have lost white champs in football, basketball and boxing. (A lot of white men cheer black athletes, of course, whomever they vote for.) But the war in Iraq, Mailer notes, gave white men white heroes. By climbing into his jumpsuit, stepping out of an S-3B Viking jet onto the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln*, Bush posed as -- one could say impersonated -- such a hero.

Mailer is talking here about white men and support for the war in Iraq. But we're talking about something that cuts deeper into emotional life, and stretches farther back into the twin histories of American labor and Republican presidencies. For Republicans have been capturing blue-collar hearts for some time now. In the summer of 1971, Jefferson Cowie tells us in a recent essay, Richard Nixon worked out a semi-clandestine "blue-collar strategy." Nixon instructed Jerome Rosow of the Department of Labor to draw up a confidential report, only 25 copies of which were circulated. One of them got into the hands of a *Wall Street Journal* reporter who exposed it under the banner, "Secret Report Tells Nixon How to Help White Workingmen and Win Their Votes."

As the article noted, "President Nixon has before him a confidential blueprint designed to help him capture the hearts and votes of the nation's white working men -- the traditionally Democratic 'forgotten Americans' that the Administration

believes are ripe for political plucking." (11) According to close advisor, H.R. Haldeman, Nixon's plan was to maintain an image as "a tough, courageous, masculine leader." The never-ending Nixon tapes actually catch Nixon talking with aides Haldeman and Ehrlichman about an episode in the popular television show "All in the Family" in which the working-class Archie Bunker confronts an old buddy, a former football player who has just come out of the closet as gay. Nixon then recounts on tape how civilizations decline when homosexuality rises, and concludes, "We have to stand up to this." Nixon sought to appeal to the blue-collar man's straightness (at least he still had that), his superiority over women (that, too), and his native-born whiteness (and that.). As Cowie sums it up, "It was neither the entire working class nor its material grievances on which the administration would focus; rather it was the 'feeling of being forgotten' among white male workers that Nixon and his advisors would seek to tap." (12)

Until Nixon, Republicans had for a century written off the blue-collar voter. But turning Marx on his head, Nixon appealed not to a desire for real economic change but to the distress caused by the absence of it. And it worked as it's doing again now. In the 1972 contest between Nixon and McGovern, 57% of the manual worker vote and 54% of the union vote went to Nixon. (This meant 22 and 25-point gains for Nixon over his 1968 presidential run.) After Nixon, other Republican presidents -- Ford, Reagan, and Bush Sr. -- followed in the same footsteps, although not always so cleverly.

Now George Bush Jr. is pursuing a sequel strategy by again appealing to the emotions of male blue-collar voters. Only he's added a new element to the mix. Instead of appealing, as Nixon did, to anger at economic decline, Bush is appealing to fear of economic displacement, and offering the Nascar Dad a set of villains to blame, and a hero to thank -- George W. Bush.

Let's begin by re-imagining the blue-collar man, for we do not normally think of him as a fearful man. The very term "Nascar Dad" like the earlier term "Joe Six Pack" suggests, somewhat dismissively, an "I'm-alright-Jack" kind of guy. We imagine him with his son, some money in his pocket, in the stands with the other guys rooting for his favorite driver and car. The term doesn't call to mind a restless house-husband or a despondent divorcee living back in his parents' house and seeing his kids every other weekend. In other words, the very image we start with may lead us away from clues to his worldview, his feelings, his politics and the links between these.

Since the 1970s, the blue-collar man has taken a lot of economic hits. The buying power of his paycheck, the size of his benefits, the security of his job -- all these have diminished. As Ed Landry, a 62 year-old-machinist interviewed by Paul Solman on the *Lehrer News Hour* said, "We went to lunch and our jobs went to China." He searched for another job and couldn't find one. He was even turned down for a job as a grocery bagger. "I was told that we'd get back to you." "Did they?" Solman asked. "No. I couldn't believe it myself. I couldn't get the job." In today's jobless recovery, the average jobless stint for a man like Landry is now 19 weeks, the longest since 1983. Jobs that don't even exist at present may eventually

open up, experts reassure us, but they aren't opening up yet. In the meantime, three out of every four available jobs are low-level service jobs. A lot of workers like Ed Landry, cast out of one economic sector, have been unable to land a job even at the bottom of another.(13)

For anyone who stakes his pride on earning an honest day's pay, this economic fall is, unsurprisingly enough, hard to bear. How, then, do these blue-collar men feel about it? Ed Landry said he felt "numb." Others are anxious, humiliated and, as who wouldn't be, fearful. But in cultural terms, Nascar Dad isn't supposed to feel afraid. What he can feel though is angry. As Susan Faludi has described so well in her book *Stiffed*, that is what many such men feel. As a friend who works in a Maine lumber mill among blue-collar Republicans explained about his co-workers, "They felt that everyone else -- women, kids, minorities -- were all moving up, and they felt like they were moving down. Even the spotted owl seemed like it was on its way up, while he and his job, were on the way down. And he's angry."

### **Strutting the political flight deck**

But is that anger directed downward -- at "welfare cheats," women, gays, blacks, and immigrants -- or is it aimed up at job exporters and rich tax dodgers? Or out at alien enemies? The answer is likely to depend on the political turn of the screw. The Republicans are clearly doing all they can to aim that anger down or out, but in any case away from the rich beneficiaries of Bush's tax cut. Unhinging the personal from the political, playing on identity politics, Republican strategists have offered the blue-collar voter a Faustian bargain: We'll lift your self-respect by putting down women, minorities, immigrants, even those spotted owls. We'll honor the manly fortitude you've shown in taking bad news. But (and this is implicit) don't ask us to do anything to change that bad news. Instead of Marie Antoinette's "let them eat cake," we have -- and this is Bush's twist on the old Nixonian strategy -- "let them eat war."

Paired with this is an aggressive right-wing attempt to mobilize blue-collar fear, resentment and a sense of being lost -- and attach it to the fear of American vulnerability, American loss. By doing so, Bush aims to win the blue-collar man's identification with big business, empire, and himself. The resentment anyone might feel at the personnel officer who didn't have the courtesy to call him back and tell him he didn't have the job, Bush now redirects toward the target of Osama bin Laden, and when we can't find him, Saddam Hussein and when we can't find him... And these enemies are now so intimate that we see them close up on the small screen in our bedrooms and call them by their first names.

Whether strutting across a flight deck or mocking the enemy, Bush with his seemingly fearless bravado -- ironically born of class entitlement -- offers an aura of confidence. And this confidence dampens, even if temporarily, the feelings of insecurity and fear exacerbated by virtually every major domestic and foreign policy initiative of the Bush administration. Maybe it comes down to this: George W. Bush is deregulating American global capitalism with one hand while

regulating the feelings it produces with the other. Or, to put it another way, he is doing nothing to change the causes of fear and everything to channel the feeling and expression of it. He speaks to a working man's lost pride and his fear of the future by offering an image of fearlessness. He poses here in his union jacket, there in his pilot's jumpsuit, taunting the Iraqis to "bring 'em on" – all of it meant to feed something in the heart of a frightened man. In this light, even Bush's "bad boy" past is a plus. He steals a wreath off a Macy's door for his Yale fraternity and careens around drunk in Daddy's car. But in the politics of anger and fear, the Republican politics of feelings, this is a plus.

There is a paradox here. While Nixon was born into a lower-middle-class family, his distrustful personality ensured that his embrace of the blue-collar voter would prove to be wary and distrustful. Paradoxically, Bush, who was born to wealth, seems really to like being the top gun talking to "regular guys." In this way, Bush adds to Nixon's strategy his lone-range machismo.

More important, Nixon came into power already saddled with an unpopular war. Bush has taken a single horrific set of attacks on September 11, 2001 and mobilized his supporters and their feelings around them. Unlike Nixon, Bush created his own war, declared it ongoing but triumphant, and fed it to his potential supporters. His policy -- and this his political advisor Karl Rove has carefully calibrated -- is something like the old bait-and-switch. He continues to take the steaks out of the blue-collar refrigerator and to declare instead, "let them eat war." He has been, in effect, strip-mining the emotional responses of blue-collar men to the problems his own administration is so intent on causing.

But there is a chance this won't work. For one thing, the war may turn out to have been a bad idea, Bush's equivalent of a runaway plant. For another thing, working men may smell a skunk. Many of them may resent those they think have emerged from the pack behind them and are now getting ahead, and they may fear for their future. But they may also come to question whether they've been offered Osama bin Laden as a stand-in for the many unfixed problems they face. They may wonder whether their own emotions aren't just one more natural resource the Republicans are exploiting for their profit. What we urgently need now, of course, is a presidential candidate who addresses the root causes of blue-collar anger and fear and who actually tackles the problems before us all, instead of pandering to the emotions bad times evoke.

#### **Notes:**

(1) According to Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers, white working-class voters (male and female) made up 55% of voters in 2000. If we define "working class" as people without a college degree, then three-quarters of Americans are working class. Three-fourths of the population is also white, so white working class voters make up 55% of those casting votes. See *Why the White Working Class Still Matters*, New York: Basic Books, 2000.

- (2) I got these figures by reanalyzing a January 2003 national poll conducted by Roper and sponsored by NBC and the *Wall Street Journal*.
- (3) Teixeira and Rogers, p. 16.
- (4) Bill Decker, "Will 'Nascar dad' set the pace in 2004 election?" Internet posting, August 21, 2004 (bdecker@theadvertiser.com). According to Matt Stearns, the term, "NASCAR dad" was coined by Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster, and described small-town and rural voters, especially white men in the South who switched from Democrat to Republican. I use the term to refer to men in blue-collar jobs in any region of the country. Matt Stearns, "NASCAR Dads' are latest hot political demographic," Sept 29, 2003.
- (5) David Sanger, "Bush Defends Tax Cuts and Announces Jobs Post," the *New York Times*, September 2, 2003, p. A20.
- (6) The Roper poll classified people into three groups: \$30,000 and less annual household income, \$30,000 to \$75,000, and \$75,000 and higher.
- (7) In Michigan, Bush got a 63% favorable rating from white union members according to a May 2003 poll. (See "The Bad News for Big Labor: Blue Collars Love This Blueblood," *Business Week*, June 30, 2003.) As Thomas Edsall points out, "As recently as the 1988 contest between Michael S. Dukakis and George Bush, voters making more than \$50,000 a year voted for the Republican by a 25 percentage point margin, 62 percent to 37 percent. By the 2000 election, the spread in the \$50,000-plus bracket fell to 7 percentage points." ("Voter Values Determine Political Affiliation," *Washington Post*, March 26, 2001, p. A1.) A poll by Stanley Greenberg for the Institute for America's Future also showed that whites without college degrees were significantly more inclined toward the Republican than the Democratic Party. See Dennis Farney, "Great Divides: Scenes from the Politics of American Culture," *Wall St. Journal*, 1994, Dec 14, p. A1; John Judis and Ruy Teixeira, "Why democrats must be populists and what populist-phobes don't understand about America," the *American Prospect*, Sept 9, 2002, p. 25.
- (8) Tom Dickinson, "Where the Sun Don't Shine," *Mother Jones*, September-October 2003, p. 19. The *Times* reports a loss of 2.5 million jobs (Sept 2, 2003, pA20. but does not reference the mass layoff study.
- (9) George Lakoff, "Framing the Dems," the *American Prospect*, September 2003, p. 32.
- (10) Norman Mailer, "The White Man Unburdened," the *New York Review of Books*, July 17, 2003, p. 4.
- (11) Jefferson Cowie, "Nixon's class struggle: romancing the New Right worker, 1969-1973," *Labor History*, August 2002, p. 257.
- (12) Cowie, *ibid.* p 260, p 279.



(13) The Jobless Recovery, June 23, 2003, *Lehrer News Hour* on-line, Interviewer Paul Solman.

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posted October 2, 2003 at 10:33 am

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