

**Doug Manor**by Robert Bellafiore

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I know I'm supposed to like shooting. What true Republican doesn't? Even putting aside high-minded principles, plain prurient self-interest would have justified becoming a decent shot. Back in military high school, joining rifle club had struck me as unforgivably square. But in the young rightwing circles of Washington, DC that I was moving in, boasting of the medals earned at *rifle club* could win you the kind of esteem that otherwise comes only from getting a pic with Tucker Carlson. How many blonde, made-up Casey Desantises-in-training might I have wooed, oh, if only I had joined rifle club!

Not even such an alluring counterfactual, though, could change the fact that the first time I shot a gun was the dullest part of the day. Learning to fire a rifle, pistol, and shotgun in backwoods Virginia was enjoyable enough, but I still don't see the appeal. But maybe shooting's relative tedium was less about the activity itself, and more about what it was up against: my encounter with the man whose property I was shooting on. After all, I would need more than guns to fulfill my host's sage advice: "Remember, if you ever find yourself in trouble

with anyone, just tell them, ‘Doug wants me to wear your face as a trophy.’ That will fix things quick.”

At least my shooting companion, Alex, had given me some warning about what we were getting into. “Doug is a character,” he said as he picked me from the Metro just after dawn. Now it would take another two hours to reach Essex County, where Alex—a gun enthusiast with a missionary’s zeal—would try to bring another disciple into the faith.

That the mysterious Doug would be hosting us on his estate was all I knew. Who even was this guy driving me? Alex and I had taken a course together at our university in Oklahoma, but that had been almost a decade ago. When we had realized a month before our outing that we were both in DC and reunited over coffee, it was the first time we had talked since school.

Barely knowing my companion wasn’t the only reason I was surprised by his invitation to go shooting. I would have thought shooting just too pedestrian for him. With his globe-travelling eccentricities (when we met in college, he had just returned from Jordan), he struck me as someone whose weapon of choice would be closer to the bow and arrow, or maybe a katana. Alex is the sort of anti-institutionalist who might be a communist hippie, or he might be a rightwing prepper. On our

drive he described his vision of starting a commune and recommended a YouTube lecture on why you should never talk to cops. I peg him as writing in RFK on the ballot, or staying home.

An hour into our ride, we were still passing apartments and condos, surely designed for DC-area workers. These identical Potemkin houses were probably built in a day, to be lived in for only slightly longer—a testament, not so much to the might of American industry, but to Washington’s ability to mold its imperial regents and clerks into people willing to live in synth-o-homes. Maybe there’s something in the DC water that makes its workers especially susceptible to this architectural slop. Russell Kirk, one of those scribblers the more highbrow DC conservatives love to quote, said of the Watergate Hotel that no one would ever be tempted to write poetry while staying there. What he meant, I think, is that the more stifling drabness you’re exposed to, the better you’ll be able to focus on what matters: keeping the DC machinery oiled, and the sinecures profitable. But whatever is in the water has leaked beyond the city, as the imperial capital expands its borders by the day.

We were headed someplace different, though. As we pulled off the road and passed through ostentatious brick gates onto a winding path, Alex squinted while he looked around: “The slaves’ cemetery is around here somewhere.” The house

itself was easier to spot—a two-and-a-half story brick manor dating to the early 1800s. Guinea fowl wandered around the house’s white Tuscan columns like saurians from the Cretaceous. The gates proclaimed the property’s regal title, but in my mind it would be Doug Manor.

The man himself was reclining on a couch when we walked in, talking to two college-aged boys. Alex had been here before and knew the court etiquette governing the payment of proper tribute: with a flourish, he revealed a handle of whiskey. As befits a haughty king ruling from his throne, Doug accepted the gift but didn’t let it distract him from his discourse on the state of the realm, the misdoings of our “retard-in-chief” Joe Biden, and the foolishness of funding Ukraine. His young subjects proved were a worthy audience, nodding along as Doug documented the president’s perfidy.

Not having much to contribute, I opted to observe the study we’d entered, which was distinguished by its antler chandeliers, shelves of ancient books, and mountains of dusty crap. The exterior grandeur had hardly suggested the decay within—ubiquitous cobwebs, stacks of dirty dishes, and a filthy bathroom suggested that the last people to clean the place might have been the slaves buried out back. For such an estate to look like this, I thought, a family would have to rise very high and then fall very low.

Alex, guns, the middle of nowhere, decline and fall. It all reminded me of being back in Oklahoma, and of the class we had taken together, on the Ottomans' descent from civilizational standard-setters to ungovernable rubes. Our professor had presented it as a chance to ask, "Suppose America is facing a similar decline—can history teach us how to reverse it?" In my more *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*-esque moments, I like to think it was that desire to right the ship of state that sent me to DC.

The professor, Dean—that's a title, not first name—Ray, was a strange bird: an unostentatious gay man in Oklahoma, and a proud McGovern voter all those years later, but also the sort of humanistic, nondoctrinaire liberal who thought education was about learning to love Shakespeare and Mozart. At least that's how I try to remember him. He was also the sort of Boomer who turned to rage-posting on Facebook to get through the Trump years. His posts split pretty evenly between links to performances of his favorite symphonies, and harangues against the president about as sophisticated as Doug's ding at our retard-in-chief. A few years after our class, Dean Ray retired, gifting me an 800-page biography of Marxist philosopher Walter Benjamin. He had decided, it seemed, that the answer to the question from our class—could America be saved?—was no, and had chosen to escape the sinking ship in his own dinghy.

My reminiscence dissipated when I realized that Doug and the boys had moved beyond the news to other topics: Rome's tactics in the Second Punic War, then naval technology's significance in the American Civil War, and finally the history of the Scottish monarchy. Doug recommended one 17<sup>th</sup>-century book on the subject. "You have to wonder why any of these boys wanted to be king—they knew they'd only last a month before they got offed," he mused.

Doug was under no such illusions of grandeur himself. Unlike those kings, he's survived long enough to realize the futility of all human endeavors. The state of the house attested to that, as well as offhand comments about some estranged woman. His health didn't look like anything to brag about, and one of the boys told me he had just begun hospice care. The conversation shifting again, Doug graced us with a performance of *Dirty Harry's* "do you feel lucky?" monologue; for him, the answer was clearly *no*. "I've decided on the epitaph for my tombstone," he announced, moving from the failures of past rulers to his own near-future: "fool."

Doug, it occurs to me later, is Dean Ray's twin. Too disgusted with the state of the country to be shocked anymore, convinced that the enemy has won and is so far along in dismantling the good that was once

here that there's nothing left to do but leave before the whole thing collapses. *Après moi, le déluge.*

Both seem to be the end of a line. Upon retirement, Dean Ray fled Oklahoma for Mexico, glad to finally be out of a state, and then country, run by Republicans. But while disdainful of political conservatism, he was a conservative of sorts in his educational idealism, and in his conviction that anyone could get something from history's great art and literature. Liberals like that are nearly extinct now. I never mustered the nerve to point out that the good liberal students in class couldn't care less about Puccini or Tolstoy—white men, after all—and scorned the old books he loved. Dean Ray's liberalism, which studies opera for its own sake, and not to howl about *Turandot's* Orientalism, makes him as much of a dinosaur as those guinea fowl we navigated around to reach the shooting range.

When it came time to shoot, Alex proved a good instructor, showing me the basics of loading and firing, offering tips for how to aim, and crying "HIT!" after the *CLANG* of the metal target when I had my occasional success. More than the actual shooting myself, I enjoyed watching him engage in a round of "run and gun"—unleashing a flurry against one target, then sprinting to a new spot to have a go at another one. But rather than focusing

on the targets, I found my attention wandering back to the house behind us, and to its lord of the manor.

We finished a few hours later and said our goodbyes to Doug, who left us with his final request about skinning our enemies. Maybe he had more in common with those Scottish warlords than I had given him credit for.

The martial skills Alex was honing, and this new assignment he had received, may prove handier than I had thought when I signed up for the trip. On the way back, having decided that I had proved my mettle, Alex let me in on a mad story involving the January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol mayhem, encounters with FBI agents at his house and the airport, and a voided security clearance that cost him his job. Alex insisted the feds had the wrong guy; an unassailable alibi could prove that he hadn't even *been* in DC that day (though he had heard Alex Jones speak outside the Supreme Court a month before). I suggested that he read *Darkness at Noon*, Arthur Koestler's novel about a Soviet interrogation of an enemy of the state. The protagonist might provide some good company, though it's not a reassuring comparison for America.

Doug Manor has witnessed a hell of a transformation in America. It was born into a small republic of proud citizens confident in their liberty—though as those slaves' graves reminded



us, it had its terrible exceptions—and now finds itself facing a sprawling behemoth, whose bureaucrats and lobbyists spread further every day into the rest of the country, and into our privacy. What will the estate see in the coming years? Walter Benjamin himself warned, “Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself.” Maybe we always had it coming, then, and maybe Doug, and Dean Ray, too, were right to want to get out of here before it gets really ugly.

And everyone—Doug above all—seemed to expect his going away for good to happen soon. What will happen to Doug Manor then? The estate’s plight called to mind Booth Tarkington’s novel *The Magnificent Ambersons*, in which the last scion of a dying dynasty struggles to protect the family name from shame, not realizing that the town’s residents don’t even recognize the name anymore. I don’t know Doug’s last name. At least the property will fare better than the Amberson Mansion, which is demolished by book’s end. Doug Manor is on the Historical Registry, so it can’t become the site of the soul-crushing condos that will probably hit the rest of Essex County one of these days.

I offered to buy Alex dinner at a Waffle House on our way back, but he had to hurry back to church. He dropped me off at the Metro outskirts, and I began the journey back to the imperial capital.



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