

The courage of one columnist

“We still don’t know the first thing about terrorists.” That was the title of last week’s column in Haaretz, the Israeli newspaper now available in English and Hebrew on the Internet, by American-born (Los Angeles) and educated (UC Berkeley) Bradley Burston. I have not read or heard an American journalist or TV host make a similar comment, but I wish I had.

What’s remarkable is that Burston, who lives in Israel, has “seen terrorism up close, what it does to people.” He writes that he has “talked with terrorists and their victims,” and that he has had dreams “haunted by the sight of strips of human flesh hanging from a charred bus ceiling.” And yet because of his experiences in the fields of terror, he concluded: “We still don’t know what makes terrorists cross the lines that separate mad from madness, and madness from evil-doing. We don’t know the first thing about what really goes on inside their heads. But that does not stop us from pretending that we do.”

Coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing by our media was full of such pretending, by commentary exuding bloated certainty or by guesswork masquerading as insight. Burston offers a pithy summary of all that: “If some on the right were quick to reject any association between Islamist terrorism and U.S. – and for that matter, Israeli – military operations, some on the left seemed to see little else.”

Burston refused to fire off comments from the hip: “I know only this about terrorism: It is evil. We can spin it as we like, bend it to our own prejudices, but it remains evil authentic, in all its forms, justifications, and euphemisms.” Bless those reporters, standing there on the streets of Boston, who asked questions similar to the ones Burston asked, but got more spin than light for answers.

Academicians who have researched and written about contemporary terrorism do better than the sound bite experts from Washington, D.C., think tanks. Expertise, after all, is not knowledge. One professor observed after 9/11 that cynical political

and religious “leaders attract youth who feel humiliated, culturally and personally,” to carry out terrorist activities against enemies of the state or faith.

Another suggested that the “fringe motivations” of young terrorists, as the two Boston bombers, “are difficult to understand.” A comment you could hear also from a non-tenured patron of most neighborhood bars. As is this one: “Now it seems to me that there will always be some subset of humanity, which, for whatever motives, takes destructive power into their hands and uses it against society at large. That, in the largest sense, is the problem.” But Burston, reporters and viewers alike, were asking why (and how) two trees in the forest “went bad,” not how the whole forest is doing.

You can't blame the media for not coming up with even pieces of answers. Western reporters aren't going to become embedded in the training camps of Al Qaeda or Hezbollah, nor will they be permitted to sit down for chats with hate-preaching clerics. They can't even learn the truth about how those fighting terror make their decisions on where to strike back and how to do it. And if they find out, it's often only long after the action. But when it comes to terror and terrorists, the public wants to know who the perpetrators of the last attack were, who the ones of next attack might be, and what drove (and will drive) the individuals involved in each to their evildoing.

We are likely to receive tiny and superficial slivers of answers. Perhaps years from now, when a gifted novelist peers into terrorism's heart of darkness, our understanding might grow from his or her vision of that bloody part of the human

condition.

Salamon taught German literature and culture at several East Coast colleges, served as staff reporter for the St. Louis Business Journal and as senior editor for Defense Systems Review. He has published three academic books and contributed articles to the Washington Post and the American Conservative.