

9/11: You Weren't Stupid, Mr. Brown!

CNN's brief shining moment on September 11, 2001

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Aaron Brown, news anchor during most of CNN's coverage on September 11, 2001, was interviewed on the 15th anniversary of the event. He said in that interview that he had felt "profoundly stupid" when he was reporting the destruction of the first Tower (the South Tower) on that morning.

I...I will tell you...that a million things had been running through my mind about what might happen. About the effect of a jet plane hitting people above where the impact was, what might be going on in those buildings. And it just never occurred to me that they'd come down. And I thought...it's the only time I thought, maybe you just don't have what it takes to do a story like this. Because it just had never occurred to me." (CNN, Sept. 11, 2016, interviewer Brian Stelter)

Is it not remarkable that Brown was made to feel stupid, and to feel inadequate as a news anchor, during the precise moments of his coverage of that day when his senses and his mind were fully engaged and on the right track?

Shortly after 9:59 a.m. Brown had been standing on a roof in New York City about 30 blocks from the World Trade Center. He was looking directly at the South Tower as it was destroyed. He was not just a journalist and not just a news anchor: he was an eyewitness.

He immediately interrupted a journalist who was reporting live about the Pentagon:

Wow! Jamie. Jamie, I need you to stop for a second. There has just been a huge explosion...we can see a billowing smoke rising...and I can't...I'll tell you that I can't see that second Tower. But there was a cascade of sparks and fire and now this...it looks almost like a mushroom cloud, explosion, this huge, billowing smoke in the second Tower..." (9:59:07 a.m.)

Having reported honestly what he saw with his own eyes, Brown next did exactly what he should have done as a responsible news anchor. He let his audience know that while he did not know what had happened it was clear that there were two hypotheses in play, the explosion hypothesis and the structural failure hypothesis. And then he went to his reporters on the scene, as well as to authorities, to try and sort out which hypothesis was correct.

Here are examples of his setting forth—after the first building was destroyed and again after the second was destroyed—the rival hypotheses:

and then just in the last several minutes there has been a second explosion or, at least, perhaps not an explosion, perhaps part of the building simply collapsed. And that's what we saw and that's what we're looking at." (10:03:47)

...
This is just a few minutes ago...we don't know if...something happened, another explosion, or if the building was so weakened...it just collapsed." (10:04:36 a.m.)

...
we believe now that we can say that both, that portions of both Towers of the World Trade Centre, have collapsed. Whether there were second explosions, that is to say, explosions other than the planes hitting them, that caused this to happen we cannot tell you." (10:29:21 a.m.)

...
Our reporters in the area say they heard loud noises when that happened. It is unclear to them and to us whether those were explosions going on in the building or if that was simply the sound of the collapse of the buildings as they collapsed, making these huge noises as they came down." (11:17:45 a.m.)

Brown's honest reporting of his perceptions was balanced repeatedly by his caution. Here is an example:

it almost looks...it almost looks like one of those implosions of buildings that you see except there is nothing controlled about this...this is devastation." (10:53:10 a.m.)

His next move, having set forth the two hypotheses, was to ask his reporters on the scene, who were choking on pulverized debris and witnessing gruesome scenes, what they perceived.

Reporter Brian Palmer said honestly that he was not in a position to resolve the issue.

Brown: Was there...Brian, did it sound like there was an explosion before the second collapse, or was the noise the collapse itself?" (10:41:08 a.m.)

Palmer: "Well, from our distance...I was not able to distinguish between an explosion and the collapse. We were several hundred yards away. But we clearly saw the building come down. I heard your report of a fourth explosion: I can't confirm that. But we heard some "boom" and then the building fold in on itself."

Two others were more definite about what they perceived.

Brown: Rose, whadya got? (10:29:43 a.m.)

Rose Arce: I'm about a block away. And there were several people that were hanging out the windows right below where the plane crashed, when suddenly you saw the top of the building start to shake, and people began leaping from the windows in the north side of the building. You saw two people at first plummet and then a third one, and then the entire top of the building just blew up...

Brown: Who do we have on the phone, guys? Just help me out here. Patty, are you there? (10:57:51 a.m.)

Patty: Yes, I am here.

Brown: Whaddya got?

Patty: About an hour ago I was on the corner of Broadway and Park Place—that's about a thousand yards from the World Trade Center—when the first Tower collapsed. It was a massive explosion. At the time the police were trying desperately to evacuate people from the area. When that explosion occurred it was like a scene out of a horror film.

As can be seen, the explosion hypothesis was flourishing. Even the news caption at the bottom of the screen shortly after the destruction of the South Tower (10:03:12 a.m.) is striking to read today:

“THIRD EXPLOSION SHATTERS WORLD TRADE CENTER IN NEW YORK”

After checking with his reporters, Brown continued to explore his hypotheses, this time by consulting authorities. This was where he was led astray. “Authorities” are less securely tied to evidence than witnesses and may, in fact, be implicated in high level deception.

First Brown consulted a political authority. He got the Mayor of New York City on the line.

Brown: Sir, do you believe that...was there another set of explosions that caused the buildings to collapse, or was it the structural damage caused by the planes?” (12:31:45 p.m.)

Giuliani: I don't, I don't know, I, uh, I, uh...I, I saw the first collapse and heard the second 'cause I was in a building when the second took place. I think it was structural but I cannot be sure.”

Later in the afternoon Giuliani got his script right and was more definite in ruling out explosions. But, of course, Giuliani had no right to pronounce on the science of building destruction. Brown should have persisted in his questioning.

Finally, Brown brought in an engineer, Jim DeStefano—associated, we were told, with the National Council of Structural Engineers. DeStefano's brief comments put an end to Brown's explosion hypothesis and rendered CNN's news coverage safe for public consumption.

Brown: Jim De Stefano is a structural engineer. He knows about big buildings and what happens in these sort of catastrophic moments. He joins us from Deerfield, Connecticut on the phone. Jim, the plane hits...what...and I hope this isn't a terribly oversimplified question, but what happens to the building itself? (04:20:45 p.m.)

DeStefano: ...It's a tremendous impact that's applied to the building when a collision like this occurs. And it's clear that that impact was sufficient to do damage to the columns and the bracing system supporting the building. That coupled with the fire raging and the high temperatures softening the structural steel then precipitated a destabilization of the columns and clearly the columns buckled at the lower floors causing the building to collapse.

I am not in a position to call DeStefano a fake or to claim he was reading from a script given to him by others, but I am prepared to say he was extremely irresponsible. He did not say

“here is one hypothesis.” He said, in effect, “this is what happened.” He was in no position to make this claim. There had been no photographic or video analysis of the building destruction, no analysis of the remains of the WTC, no cataloguing of eyewitnesses, nor any of the other methods of evidence gathering. He was shooting in the dark. He was silencing a journalist who was sincerely trying to discover the truth. As we have known for years now, DeStefano not only *could have been wrong*: he was wrong.[1]

And let us remember that the entire War on Terror, with its suffering and oppression, has depended on this false structural failure hypothesis. No structural failure hypothesis, no guilty Muslim fanatics. No guilty Muslim fanatics, no War on Terror.

Some readers will feel I am too generous with Brown and with CNN. But I am not interested in portraying them as broadly “dissident” or as on the political Left. I am simply interested in calling things as I see them and giving credit where credit is due. Anyone who wants a contrast to Brown’s performance is free to watch the work of Fox News anchor, Jon Scott, on September 11, 2001. The same confidence that allowed him to name Bin Laden as a suspect 42 seconds after the impact of the second plane allowed him to proclaim the structural failure hypothesis directly after the destruction of the South Tower. He persisted even when his reporters in the field clearly spoke of explosions.

David Lee Miller reported:

we heard a very loud blast, an explosion. We looked up, and the building literally began to collapse before us...” (10:01:17 a.m.)

Rick Leventhal said:

The FBI is here, as you can see. They had roped this area off. They were taking photographs and securing this area just prior to that huge explosion that we all heard and felt.” (10:06:39 a.m.)

News anchor Scott was troubled by none of this. He overrode, silenced and patronized Fox reporters. *At no point did he even acknowledge the existence of a second reasonable hypothesis for the Trade Center destruction.*

Of course, it is true that by the end of the day of September 11, 2001 CNN and Fox were singing from the same hymnbook. But I believe we ought to acknowledge Brown’s brief, shining moment and consider what might happen if journalists found their courage and trusted their senses and their minds.

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This article was originally published on [OffGuardian](#).

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Sources

Same-day coverage by CNN and Fox for September 11, 2001 has been sporadically available on the Internet. My notes are from my own previously downloaded files. Times should be accurate to within two seconds.

Notes

[1] Many works have appeared over the years refuting the account of the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers released by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). But special note should be taken of two sources:

Ted Walter, Beyond Misinformation: What Science Says About the Destruction of World Trade Center Buildings 1, 2, and 7. Architects & Engineers for 9/11 Truth, 2015.

<https://www.ae911truth.org/images/BeyondMisinfo/Beyond-Misinformation-2015.pdf>

Lawyers' Committee for 9/11 Inquiry, First Amended Grand Jury Petition, filed July 30, 2018 at the office of the U.S. Attorney in Manhattan, N.Y.

<https://www.lawyerscommitteefor9-11inquiry.org/lc-doj-first-amended-grand-jury-petition/>

In addition, a recent academic report on the related destruction of World Trade Center 7 destroys whatever confidence we might have in NIST's accounts:

J. L. Hulsey, et al, A Structural Reevaluation of the Collapse of World Trade Center 7 (draft), University of Alaska Fairbanks, Sept. 2019.

https://salsa3.salsalabs.com/o/50694/signup_page/uaf-wtc7-draft-report?killorg=True&loggedOut=True

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