

## ***FROM A JOURNALIST'S NOTEBOOK***

**By Michael Ventura**

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*Newspapers & Blogs.* Old-school news reporters have a proverb. It goes something like this: “Don’t believe your mother when she says ‘I love you’ unless you get a second source. If she says ‘I *really* love you,’ confirm with two sources.” Newspaper reporters who don’t consistently get their facts straight don’t keep their jobs. Editors who don’t catch big mistakes lose their jobs. Every day a major newspaper prints corrections; thousands of facts are printed in each issue, and few need correction.. A major error on a big story becomes a scandal (so rare are they). No matter how the paper slants -- conservative (*Wall Street Journal*), more or less liberal (*New York Times*), solidly mainstream (*Washington Post*) -- their facts can generally be trusted.

The greatest sins of newspapers -- deadly sins indeed -- are sins of omission and emphasis. In international coverage especially, historical context is universally ignored. Like our pop culture, American newspapers live in an eternal present which the past does not effect. This in itself distorts almost every story; though facts are reported truly, a lack of context often makes the facts themselves lie. A fact presented apart from its context can be judged only emotionally, not intelligently. As for sins of emphasis: the New York Times has famously apologized for taking our government at its word during the build-up to our invasion of Iraq. Buried deep in its lengthy articles were well-documented facts that clearly undermined the government’s positions, but few people read that far. I was using the Times as a source to punch holes in Colin Powell’s UN presentation the day after he made it, but the headlines and lead paragraphs of the paper’s coverage seemed to take Powell at his word. The general impression of approval and belief was made by emphasis and placement. This practice is constant in all major dailies and all broadcast news. One must read and listen with skepticism and precision to find the news under the news.

In my columns I never site blogs because they often fail to site their sources and there’s no way to know if they’ve confirmed their facts. Bloggers break important stories, but those stories only become important after old-school hard-news reporters confirm them the old-fashioned way. The blog phenomenon is healthy and welcome. Blogs democratize reportage and keep news outlets on their toes. But until there’s a way to trust their facts, blogs are useless to commentators like myself. Anyone can spew opinion about anything, but opinion unbuttressed by fact is just a happy-hour rant.

The facts are always incomplete; there’s always more to the story than even the best journalists can discover; that’s the nature of human experience. The mark of a professional is thoroughness. You go as hard as you can and hope your contribution increases understanding. Most importantly, when facts contradict your opinion you ditch opinion and follow the facts.

*9/11 Conspiracy Theories.* “The World Trade Center buildings couldn’t possibly fall straight down nor fall so fast unless carefully rigged to explode from inside.” People who tell me that always site some physicist quoted on some blog or video. Like me, these people haven’t the expertise to judge the physics (or the architectural stats, etc.), nor do they know that the blogger knows, nor that the physicists (or stats) actually exist. “Why did the third building fall, no plane hit it, and do you know what was going on in there and who was head of World Trade Center security?” My response has been: Though it seems to me possible that the seismological impact of two huge falling buildings might bring down a smaller adjacent building, I know little of physics and seismology and less of engineering, architecture, stress factors, etc. I haven’t the knowledge to judge these theories; I don’t personally know anyone who does, including those who swear by such theories. I would be very interested in an international conference of physicists, seismologists, architects, and engineers, that would conduct openly a peer-review of the theories and publish their findings. That’s how science is done: a hypothesis tested and subjected to peer-review. Such a conference would have to be international and held in, say, Sweden; no one sane would trust the findings of an American effort one way or the other.

“I’ve seen videos that prove the towers were exploded from within.” Yeah, and I’ve seen *Jurassic Park*, *Spiderman*, *Lord of the Rings*, *King Kong*. Digital technology can make anything look like anything. Digital technology can create interviews that never existed, syncing voice-overs to how people moved their mouths. Movies and TV do it all the time. Given this technology, no video, blog or web-site can be taken at face value.

“Firemen, policemen, and office workers heard many explosions in the towers before they collapsed.” With fires shooting up and down shafts and vents, while the electrical system went wild, it would be strange indeed if there were not myriad explosions in a skyscraper with thousands of electrical transformers, gas-lines, flammable materials and pressurized containers -- strange indeed, if one did not hear many explosions. And stranger still if witnesses, in the heat of such panicked action, could accurately identify the nature of such a chaos of explosions.

The conspiracy usually outlined would require dozens of people to do lots of manual labor for a considerable time with no leak then and no leak since. Perfect secrecy accomplished by, say, a hundred people. As a journalist and student of history, to me that would be strangest of all.

But I wonder: Even if these conspiracy theorists are right, does it matter? Does it matter which cabal of murderous madmen was responsible? What matters more is that cabals of murderous madmen now set the world’s agenda. It’s easy to say that one way or another it’s always been like that, and I would agree that there have always been cabals and some have been powerful, but what has been more powerful by far is the counterpoint of momentum and inertia of the masses of us, throughout the ages, who want to live our own lives by our own lights and do the best we can. What’s changed is that technology has given cabals vastly disproportionate power. A primitive rural country like North Korea can manufacture atom bombs. Guerillas hiding in caves, like Hezbollah, can fire missiles. Fanatics, whether in Al-Qaeda or the White House, have vast networking capacities at their fingertips. How much difference will that make in the long run? No one knows. But I know this: the Sixties, Seventies, Eighties, and Nineties were nothing like each other and nothing like now, and 2016 will be nothing like 2006; nobody knows what will cause and enforce the change, but something will. As the problems of today are nothing like yesterday’s, the problems of tomorrow will be nothing like today’s. There’s no way to be adequately prepared. The unexpected always happens.

An aside about conspiracy theories: Isn’t it odd how we’re willing to acknowledge our own limits and ineptness, while endowing our enemies with incredible precision and competence? Why do so many need to believe that the bad guys are so much more capable than we are? It’s as though we think that evil endows one with extraordinary, even superhuman, ability. Endowing evil with powers that just-plain-folks never possess is as old as the Old Testament. Me, I figure the bad guys are as human as I, so they probably fuck up as much as me. History proves that assassinations are comparatively simple to accomplish; the more complex a plan, the more it is vulnerable to mistake and accident. Study the history of D-Day and see for yourself.

*Bat Masterson.* There are many journalists whose examples I revere, Murry Kempton chief among them, but my personal favorite is Bat Masterson. In Dodge City and other wild towns he was a gunfighter -- usually on the good side. He knew and loved Wyatt Earp, and fought by his side; knew and disliked Doc Holliday, tolerating Doc only for Wyatt’s sake.. A professional gambler, Bat Masterson knew and played the odds, winning more than he lost. As he aged and his era passed, he was trusted to referee high-stakes boxing matches. This old gunfighter judged Jack Johnson’s bouts, among others. Finally, he left the west and settled in Manhattan. He became a journalist. His pal Damon Runyon based a character on Bat in the original *Guys and Dolls*.

Bat Masterson died at his trade -- as I hope to do. There’s no better way to go. The year was 1921, he was 68 years old. He had a stroke at his desk after writing this: “There are those who argue that everything breaks even in this old dump of a world. I suppose these ginks who argue that way hold that because the rich man gets ice in the summer and the poor man gets it in the winter things are breaking even for both. Maybe so, but I swear I can’t see it that way.”

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