

A different viewpoint

Television reporter shares perspective on terrorist attacks, legislators' role in the aftermath

BY THERESA STAHL



The moment CNN anchor Aaron Brown knew how much the events of Sept. 11 would change Americans' lives wasn't when he signed off the air after his 15 hours of nonstop coverage of the attacks.

It didn't hit him on a visit to Ground Zero or during an interview with someone who had lost a loved one in the World Trade Center.

It was the look on his daughter's face when she walked into an airport with him and, for the first time, saw guards dressed in camouflage, armed with machine guns.

Brown is the face many watched on Sept. 11, and the day is so prominent in his career that describing it takes up more than one-fourth of his biography, which lists coverage of some of the biggest events during the past two decades.

Brown, a native of Hopkins, was invited to share his thoughts of that historic day and his experience since as a news reporter with members of the Minnesota Legislature on Jan. 31. His talk was part of "Minnesota Horizons 2002: A Changing State in a Changing World."

Earlier that day, House and Senate members participated in panel discussions about the state's changing demography and public infrastructure. Listening and talking with Brown was an opportunity to look at issues from a national perspective.

He shared his view of the attacks as a reporter, as an American, and as a father.

"The biggest story of our lives landed in my lap," he said, and he got to tell the whole world about it.

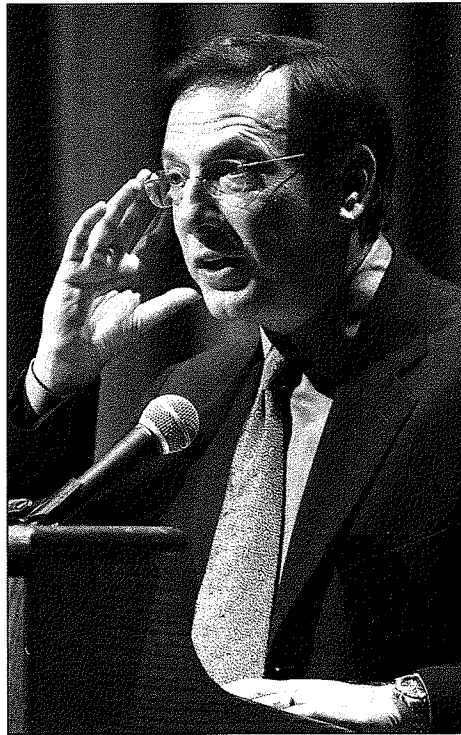


PHOTO BY ANDREW VON BANK

CNN Anchor Aaron Brown speaks to legislators and staff Jan. 31 as part of "Minnesota Horizons 2002: A Changing State in a Changing World," held at the St. Paul Technical College.

As a reporter, he said he wants to see that important issues are talked about in full. "We want to create an environment where all issues are talked about in a civil way."

Sometimes on his way to work, Brown would walk by Ground Zero. Of all the tragedy that took place there, he said it was heartening to never once see a disrespectful moment. No jokes, no laughs, he said.

He reflected on how he and many others saw much of America before the attacks, saying people had separate lives, separate schools, separate churches, and separate neighborhoods. "We were part of a much broader, bigger community, but it took a painful experience to make that clear to me," he said.

Brown said that day he wasn't just reporting the news, he was reporting history. "And history is going to judge how we handled our fear." Legislators, he told the audience, are going to be asked to change laws that affect freedoms, and that it is going to cost them a lot of money. "We shouldn't have to do it ... (especially) in a time when money is hard to find."

Rep. Ruth Johnson (DFL-St. Peter) said later in an interview that last year making preparations in law for a potential threat of foot and mouth disease was a "good foundation" for upcoming legislation for facing terrorism in Minnesota. She said Brown's message of freedoms made her think about creating a balance of security and liberty.


"We want to get it right," she said.

Brown, who lives in New York with his wife and daughters, said the attacks have changed his sense of security for his family, and for his community.

One audience member asked what Brown thought would happen to the site of Ground Zero. Brown replied that there will be a lot of demands and a lot of genuine concern for the place where 2,000-plus victims are never going to be found.

"It is a graveyard," he said. He said the discussion of what should be done should involve the nation, not just New York City.

Rep. Peggy Leppik (R-Golden Valley) asked how the media have changed since Sept. 11. Brown said reporters have a better understanding of the role they're in and have a much better sense of purpose.

"It's a shame that it takes something so horrific to remind us of that," he said. "But we remembered again why it matters." 

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