

That gentleman holding a head

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

I recently heard a cable news anchorman refer to the terrorist dude who cut a man's head off as "the gentleman."

It was one of those grisly episodes in the new war in Iraq and Syria where a hostage is brought forward and the person who kills the poor soul gives a self-righteous little speech before decapitating the hostage in cold blood.

The killer spoke English and the news anchor, pointing that out, said "the gentleman speaking" appeared to have a British accent.

The gentleman speaking?

It would have been more pertinent to refer to the lethal spokesman as "the gentleman who is killing."

My first thought was to remember that not even a snooty British accent can warrant attaching the word "gentleman" to someone who is slicing another person's head off. Some accents can give the illusion of a quality person whether the person is first rate or not. Similarly, some accents can make brainy people sound hickish. A Texas accent, for instance. President Lyndon Johnson never did manage to get his cornpone accent bent into something a little more mainstream.

President John Kennedy, on the other hand, was born into an upper-crust Boston accent. He could have said anything and, to most of the rest of us in this country, it created the illusion of a highly cultured man even when Kennedy said something foolish. He was one of those lucky dudes who could say, "Please pass the salt" and guests at the table would coo and curtsy (which isn't easy sitting down).

The same was true of President Franklin Roosevelt and his buttery upstate New York accent.

However, I don't think that even a British accent was snooty enough to warrant causing a television news anchor to refer to a gory murderer as a gentleman.

Blame part of this on the tendency of many journalists to try to create a level playing field while reporting on diverse individuals, be they right or be they wrong. That TV anchor is sort of accustomed to giving everyone the benefit of the doubt by referring to them as "the gentleman" or "the lady."

That practice is also common in courts and in High-Church newspapers like the New York Times. The Times is in such a professional habit of avoiding special treatment that it has adopted the almost sane practice of identifying a gangster as "Mr. Capone."

Civilized people in general are kind enough to assume that we all deserve the term of gentleman or lady, at least until we have been convicted of something. For one thing, it's a habit that tries to respect the principle of innocent until proven guilty.

Nonetheless, that well-intentioned practice can sometimes become ludicrous - especially when the person you're talking about is dripping with blood while smiling proudly at the severed head of a helpless victim.

So that recent anchorman the other day just got carried away with a routine habit that can on rare occasion go way overboard. For instance, it sounds strange when someone says something like "Mr. Hitler murdered millions of people."

Similarly, can't a journalist or a trial lawyer stop short of referring to a person who decapitates people as "the gentleman" and settle instead for "the man" wielding the knife?

Actually, as a World War II brat, I was part of the Hitler malady. And as an opinion writer today, rather than an unflavored straight reporter, I prefer when talking about Mr. Hitler to simply say instead of Mister, that he was "a crazy SOB who murdered millions of people."

Perhaps that is unprofessional.

So sue me.

But even a person who removes a head with a knife can be called an individual or something else short of "the gentleman."

So why am I not surprised? It is massively common for many of my colleagues in the press to refer to ordinary halfwit criminals as "masterminds."

But if a criminal is a mastermind, then how come he got caught?

High percentages of them do. There is such a thing from time to time as a criminal who plans a bank robbery or operates some pathetic scam to rob senior citizens. And far more often than not, the alleged "mastermind" gets arrested and punished.

That's not a gentleman or a mastermind. That, ladies and gentlemen, is pathetic.

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