

# AN INTERVIEW WITH

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**John J. Le Beau, author of *Collision of Evil***

**Start to finish, how long did it take you to write *Collision of Evil*?**

I began writing the novel episodically about two years ago on sort of a hobby basis. I was interested in what is involved in writing a longer piece of fiction and so started to write basically for myself. As the plot took relatively finished shape, I thought it might be worthwhile to submit it for publication.

**How did you get the idea for the book?**

I have been involved with terrorism and counterterrorism in one way or another for the better part of a decade, first in the intelligence milieu and currently as a professor specializing in terrorism studies at the George C. Marshall Center in Germany. One thing that I'm aware of is that detecting and stopping a terrorist attack is a much more complicated task than some people might like to think. I wanted to communicate that in the novel. Out of habit, I regularly consider the security situation and potential threats internationally. The genesis of the book came from considering potential threats.

**Which part of the writing process did you enjoy the most, and why?**

I especially enjoy the challenge of developing a plot sufficiently intricate to hold reader interest and then moving it toward a conclusion. With *Collision of Evil* I also enjoyed creating the international nature of the plot and the various countries where the action takes place.

**Which part of the writing process do you find the most challenging, and why?**

Translating the characters from a personality existing solely in my head to the written page was definitely the most difficult part. The main challenge here is to communicate with sufficient color and precision the personality traits that one has imagined, in a way that does not unduly hold up the narrative. I enjoy characterizations, but this is something that requires thought and care in crafting.

**Do any of the characters in *Collision of Evil* have an autobiographical component? If so, which character, and how are you and the character similar?**

I don't believe that any of the characters are consciously autobiographical, although perhaps a certain amount of transference is always present in fictional characterization. As a former intelligence operations officer, I am certainly familiar with the way that someone like Hirter looks at the world, at security issues, and dangers. On another front, I suppose that I should admit that I fancy myself something of a lay expert on beer, and perhaps some of that comes through in the book, in that Waldbaer also appreciates, in an informed way, the qualities of a noble pilsner, wheat, or lager.

**How did your background influence the writing of the novel?**

My previous intelligence background has made me notably conscious of the threat all of us in the West face from a highly exclusionary, intolerant form of international terrorism. That certainly was a factor in my choice of theme for the novel. I am aware that terrorists are, if moral vacuums, nonetheless highly cunning and creative in their choice of targets and remorseless in their desire to kill those who do not share their beliefs. My academic work on terrorism has brought me into contact with a lot of people from many countries who are the victims of terrorism or who are officials trying to adequately confront the threat of terrorism, often at great personal risk.

**Did you have to do any special research when writing *Collision of Evil*? If so, what did the research involve?**

I have really tried to make the novel as credible as possible. Accordingly, I have purposely chosen settings with which I am personally familiar—to keep a ring of authenticity. I have been to basically all of the places I describe in the novel. So, in a sense, the settings have been researched. As well, although it was more years ago than I would care to admit, my doctoral dissertation concerned World War II and Germany. That served as something of a plinth for the parts of the novel that deal with that historical epoch. I have had long conversations with a number of Germans who were in the armed forces during that period, and tried to incorporate their “everyday” wartime experiences into the feel of the plot.

**How realistic is the plot of *Collision of Evil*? Could such a thing really happen?**

In my view, the plot is more realistic than many of us would be comfortable with today. There really are people out there who have a thinking structure that is utterly and implacably homicidal, and we are the ones they would most like to kill. You, me, the children in the school down the street, the guy at the checkout counter—we all serve as potential targets. I have tried to describe how these people think, what the parameters of their universe is like. Although the international community—and intelligence services in particular—have enjoyed many successes against 21st century terrorists, the threat endures. Because 9/11 was so spectacular we sometimes become deadened to the casualties inflicted by more recent terrorist attacks—in London, Madrid, Mumbai, Bali, Pakistan, and other locations. Something along the lines described in the book could certainly happen. It is grim to contemplate that terrorist attacks of real impact and consequence will undoubtedly take place in the future.

**In *Collision of Evil*, two of the book’s main characters, Robert Hirter and Kommissar Franz Waldbaer, are forced to form a somewhat tense partnership. Do you feel this is an accurate portrayal of how police officials and intelligence officers tend to interact?**

Absolutely. In fact, the topic of law enforcement and intelligence interaction is a topic I address academically with some frequency. As a former intelligence officer, I understand that the training and goals of law enforcement professionals differ markedly from the training and goals of intelligence officers, in many respects. A policeman wants to arrest someone and see the perpetrator go to trial for a conviction. The intelligence officer, from any number of services internationally, isn’t primarily interested in that. He or she might want to recruit or turn a terrorist to spy on terrorist ranks. An intelligence officer might be tasked with physically grabbing a terrorist overseas, or even in a targeted killing; these activities are antithetical to what policemen do. Whereas a law enforcement officer essentially wants to prosecute someone for a crime that has been committed, the intelligence officer might be tasked to see that a crime doesn't get committed by terrorists in the first place. But the reality is, law enforcement and intelligence officers have to work together to defeat what is a highly complex international threat. This is surely happening; we see it with CIA and the FBI, for example. There will always be tensions and even rivalries, and this can be healthy. But there is no substitute for finding the best way to work together to stop the bad guys.

**What do you admire most about Robert Hirter? Least?**

Most: his unwavering persistence in wanting to find his brother’s killer. Least: Perhaps his reluctance to see Waldbaer’s good qualities at first.

**What do you admire most about Kommissar Waldbaer? Least?**

As the character is written, I admire Waldbaer’s moral revulsion at murder and his being the master of his own house: he sets the investigatory rules that he is comfortable with, and that is what matters most to him. Waldbaer is, on the other hand, perhaps a bit too self-absorbed, about his health for example, but not in an obsessive way.

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### **Why did you choose Germany for the setting of this book?**

I have lived in Germany for many years, speak the language, and am at home in the culture and ebb and flow of life. I thought I could write about Germany credibly and at the same time provide a location that might interest the reader, who might be less exposed to things German than I have been. Although much smaller than the States in landmass, Germany is nonetheless very rich geographically and has areas of striking beauty—the Bavarian Alps and lakes region for example. I thought this might make a good setting and provide variety of scenery. As well, lots of Americans have visited Germany over the years as tourists or on business, and they might find it interesting, or evocative of old memories, to revisit the scene again vicariously through the novel.

### **What commentary are you making about the nature of evil in *Collision of Evil*?**

Well, first, we should understand that the book is primarily entertainment, so I don't want to get too lofty in what it might say about what are surely weighty issues. Still, I have tried to suggest that evil is not a bloodless theological concept but a living reality, the appalling consequences of which we can see every day, if we are inclined to look. Evil exists regardless of historical period or political conviction. Evil, understood perhaps as the utter absence of humanity, is arguably the only common thread linking, say, a convinced National Socialist concentration camp guard with a severe jihadist devotee of al Qaeda. I have met a few people in my life, only a few, luckily, who in my mind were moral black holes, devoid of any drop of kindness, viscerally inclined to harm others in some way, and utterly in thrall to the negative. I doubt that evil will ever be extinguished from the human condition, perhaps for necessary reasons, but we all have a duty to recognize its reality, and oppose its works, if we are able.

### **Based on your experience, do you think *Collision of Evil* provides an accurate depiction of the mind of a terrorist?**

I really do. A dedicated, convinced terrorist lives in a world where the points of reference are entirely divorced from ours, entirely different from ours. Noteworthy is their degree of overwhelming commitment to their cause. Terrorism is their life, it defines these people; absent the atmosphere of terrorism, they cannot breathe, they would suffocate without violence. The perverse aspect of all this is that they cloak themselves in a mantle of virtue and are entirely able to justify even the most reprehensible action by reference to their cause. If you are faced with a truly convinced, committed terrorist, there is no room for dialogue or conversation; that would be folly.

### ***Collision of Evil* starts at a relentless pace and the action never lets up. What is your secret to creating a novel so filled with urgency?**

No secret, really. Urgency is the reality of detecting a terrorist plot but having only bits of information about it. I fully expect that any intelligence or law enforcement officer would agree with this sentiment: when a hint of a terrorist plot is revealed, everything else becomes secondary to unraveling the mystery, to filling in the blanks and to trying to save lives.

### **Do you have other books in the works?**

Yes. In fact, I am working on two novels with the Waldbaer character, just because I had two disparate ideas that seem unlikely to fit a single coherent plot. And I am playing a bit at writing a historical novel. I am also doing a chapter for a non-fiction book on terrorism and working with colleagues on that.