

After exposure of 2012 kidnapping story

Vanity Fair, Richard Engel and NBC attempt a cover-up

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The American mass media is a perpetual and festering disgrace. In recent decades, its leading news outlets and personalities have become little more than propaganda extensions of the White House, the Pentagon and the CIA.

The *World Socialist Web Site* could not respond to all of the media's efforts to conceal or obscure the truth, all the disinformation and outright lies even were it to devote every resource to the effort on an around-the-clock basis.

Nonetheless, certain outstandingly and brazenly dishonest efforts demand a reply.

We have already taken note of the recent exposure of the claims by NBC News' chief foreign correspondent Richard Engel that he was kidnapped in December 2012 by supporters of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. As it turns out, Engel was in the hands of a group—the North Idlib Falcons Brigade—affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, i.e., anti-Assad forces supported and financed by Washington.

Perhaps most importantly, according the *New York Times*, “NBC executives were informed of [North Idlib Falcons Brigade leaders] Mr. Ajouj and Mr. Qassab's possible involvement during and after Mr. Engel's captivity, according to current and former NBC employees and others who helped search for Mr. Engel, including political activists and security professionals. Still, the network moved quickly to put Mr. Engel on the air with an account blaming Shiite captors and did not present the other possible version of events.”

Engel described in considerable and self-serving detail his supposed ordeal in a piece published by *Vanity Fair* magazine in April 2013. Many of the facts Engel reported in the article, including several deaths, have been exposed as untrue. That the NBC reporter was in friendly hands must also cast considerable doubt on other parts of his story, including his kidnappers' sadism, their torture and death threats, and their pro-Assad statements.

In a transparent effort at damage control, *Vanity Fair* has posted a new piece, “How NBC Outmaneuvered the Richard Engel Outrage Machine,” by Bryan Burrough. The article entirely and quite deliberately abstracts the December 2012 incident from its political context, the furious propaganda

campaign against the Syrian regime, which is the only way the incident can be made sense of. It is a verbal dust-storm aimed at the eyes of the public.

Among other things, Burrough's piece (a) denies the significance of whether pro- or anti-Assad forces held Engel in 2012; (b) attempts to shield NBC executives from the suspicion that they knew at the time that anti-government forces allied to the US were involved; and (c) suggests that the Engel episode pales in comparison with the seriousness of the allegations against NBC anchor Brian Williams, accused of exaggerating his role in various incidents in the Iraq war.

Engel, who speaks and acts like a State Department or intelligence analyst, NBC News and *Vanity Fair* have been caught participating in a US government-organized propaganda operation to justify an unprovoked war, and the recent article is an attempt to cover their sordid tracks.

The reader needs to recall that in November and December 2012, in the wake of Barack Obama's re-election, the American ruling elite and media launched an intensive campaign to influence public opinion in favor of a military attack on Syria, aimed at overthrowing the Assad regime, an ally of Iran and Russia.

In November 2012, more than half a dozen articles appeared on the WSWS laying bare this development. A November 13 Perspective column made the point that “One week after the reelection of President Barack Obama, the drumbeat for war against Syria has escalated sharply.”

The WSWS commentary noted that American imperialism “is determined to use military force and the intensification of the bloodbath being inflicted upon the Syrian people to install a puppet government subordinated to US interests in the region. A primary US aim in this military adventure is to deprive Tehran of its main ally in the Arab world in preparation for an even bloodier war against Iran itself.”

Engel's alleged kidnapping occurred in mid-December. He appeared on the “Today” morning show December 18, the day after his release, and said this about his abductors: “This is a government militia. These are people who are loyal to President Bashar al-Assad. They are Shiite. They were talking openly

about their loyalty to the government, openly expressing their—the Shia faith. They are trained by Iranian Revolutionary Guard. They are allied with Hezbollah.”

Engel’s claims about the pro-Assad forces and their Iranian sponsors were widely disseminated.

Given the timing of the NBC team’s seizure, the fact that, according to the *Times*, network executives knew the identity of the alleged captors and Engel’s almost obsessive preoccupation with the threat supposedly represented by Iran, it does not seem a stretch to suggest that the kidnapping story was a provocation intended to help alter public opinion, which was largely hostile to a new Middle East war.

Vanity Fair’s Burrough, however, sees nothing fishy in the entire business, writing “[I]n interviews with current and former NBC News executives, I could find little evidence that anyone at the network seriously entertained immediate doubts about the veracity of Engel’s version of events, much less contemplated broadcasting them.” NBC executives told him they had no doubts. That should alleviate any concerns!

In its April 15 article on the kidnapping, the *Times* reported: “NBC’s own assessment during the kidnapping had focused on Mr. Qassab and Mr. Ajouj, according to a half-dozen people involved in the recovery effort. NBC had received GPS data from the team’s emergency beacon that showed it had been held early in the abduction at a chicken farm widely known by local residents and other rebels to be controlled by the Sunni criminal group.”

Burrough dismisses this airily, writing, “Two names surfaced in connection with it, a Sunni commander, Ezzo Qussab, and his deputy, Shukri Abdelbagi [Ajouj]. The NBC group, having little experience in the Middle East, much less in Middle Eastern kidnappings, didn’t know what to think, especially after another news organization shared a tip that the Sunni commanders were secretly in league with the Assad regime.”

They “didn’t know what to think”! And what tip? What is the source of this dubious tidbit, which has never been mentioned before, including in Engel’s recent comment on the NBC News web site? Qussab and Ajouj-Abdelbagi were well-known “rebels,” allied with the Free Syrian Army. The rebel commander in charge of Engel’s eventual stage-managed “rescue” was related by marriage to Ajouj-Abdelbagi.

Burrough takes as his premise that NBC “failed” to investigate Engel’s story, and works at making the case that this failure was no great matter. He never asks one of the more obvious questions: what if NBC knew from the beginning that the claims about pro-Assad forces capturing Engel were false?

Burrough cites various unnamed sources who pooh-pooh the significance of the political-sectarian identity of the kidnappers.

He writes: “‘There were a thousand pieces of information coming in,’ says someone familiar with NBC’s deliberations. ‘And when these guys get out, everyone is convinced it was Shia because Engel’s team had three Arab speakers who are experts. They are convinced. So NBC’s not supposed to

believe them? Please.’”

Burrough cites the comment of *Vanity Fair* contributing editor Sebastian Junger: “I just don’t see the smoke; I don’t see the fire. This kind of thing could happen very, very easily. I don’t think there’s any evidence NBC did this intentionally. Why would NBC be skeptical about Richard Engel if Engel himself has no motivation to lie?”

No “motivation to lie”? What can one say?

The entire American establishment, including Engel, had the most compelling motivation: they were dead set on launching a war on Syria and overthrowing its government. Engel had participated enthusiastically in at least two “regime changes” in the Middle East—in Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011, and was eager to see another. That’s why he snuck into Syrian territory in December 2012.

(The upheaval he was not happy about, naturally, was in Egypt in 2011. Engel criticized the Obama government at the time for apparently abandoning dictator Hosni Mubarak.)

Burrough continues: “For one player in the industry, John Schafer, the criticism leveled at NBC News ‘makes no sense,’ says Schafer, a Washington-based kidnapping and ransom consultant. ‘Whether it’s Sunni or Shia, it makes no difference. These people change sides daily sometimes.’”

“It makes no difference”? What’s all the fuss about? Only that the US was attempting to organize a war, behind the backs of the American people, with the help of anti-Assad propaganda efforts such as this, later with phony accounts of chemical attacks and other dirty tricks worthy of Joseph Goebbels.

The Syrian war, fomented and organized by the US and the other great powers, even without a full-scale invasion, has been a humanitarian catastrophe. But what’s all the fuss?

Finally, to compare Engel’s “kidnapping,” with all its lethal implications, to Brian Williams’ attempt to promote himself as a war hero is preposterous. Tens or perhaps hundreds of thousands of lives were at stake in Syria. The wholesale destruction of another country in the Middle East, along the lines of Iraq, was threatened.

But Burrough calls the Engel episode “a meager byproduct of the Williams scandal” and “fool’s gold.”

It is impossible to know precisely how much of this nonsense is a product of ignorance, how much stems from self-deception, and how much is a matter of deliberate deception.

Engel, NBC and *Vanity Fair* are fully implicated in the sinister and murderous plans of the US military-intelligence apparatus in the Middle East.



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