

The Guthrie kidnapping, the US media and the thousands of ICE abductions

David Walsh
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The kidnapping of NBC's *Today* show co-anchor Savannah Guthrie's mother Nancy Guthrie continued to unfold Sunday. According to news reports, the abductor or abductors have demanded \$6 million in ransom and threatened the 84-year-old woman's life if a 5:00 p.m. Monday deadline is not met.

The elder Guthrie was seized in her house in the early hours on February 1. At 1:47 a.m. her doorbell camera was disengaged, and some 40 minutes later her pacemaker app was disconnected from her cell phone, indicating she was taken from her home at that time. The following morning, family members realized she was missing when she failed to appear at church. Investigators subsequently found blood on the front porch of her house in Catalina Foothills, Arizona, north of Tucson.

Nancy Guthrie has heart problems and requires medication. Savannah Guthrie has been quoted as saying that her mother "lives in constant pain." The latter is mentally sharp but "physically limited," according to her daughter, and unable to walk any distance on her own. She presumably does not have access to her daily medication.

This is a frightening and tragic situation for the Guthrie family, no doubt affecting dozens of people at this point and perhaps for the rest of their lives. One can only hope that it ends with Nancy Guthrie's safe return to her family.

The response in the American media to this event, however, is vastly disproportionate to the significance of the event itself. The media has gone into full saturation mode on the Guthrie kidnapping. The evening and morning news television programs have been dominated by the latest developments, which sometimes occupy nearly half of the total coverage. The print media has responded likewise, insisting furthermore that their obsession is shared by everyone else.

The Hill, for example, headlined its piece, "Search for Savannah Guthrie's mother captivates an alarmed nation," and continued: "The disappearance of Nancy Guthrie, the 84-year-old mother of 'Today' show anchor Savannah Guthrie, has left much of the country on edge."

USA Today carried lines such as "Savannah Guthrie's missing mother is captivating the nation," which argued that

the vulnerability of Nancy Guthrie, an elderly woman described as having mobility problems, as a possible victim of a violent crime, is sickening and deeply uncomfortable. Our society is supposed to protect the young and the old, and somehow Nancy Guthrie became endangered anyway. How safe is anyone?

It is highly questionable whether the disappearance has "captivated the nation," although no doubt the kidnapping of a well-known television personality's family member, with all the unanswered questions surrounding it, has aroused interest and genuine concern.

The American media is undoubtedly mesmerized by the episode. First of all, this has happened to *one of them* or to one of their family members. The media personalities assume the general public is as fascinated by them and their lives as they themselves are.

USA Today claims "we know that it is an incident that is deeply, horrifically sad and frightening. And we can't stop watching and waiting for news. ... When tragedy hits the lives of the rich and famous, the American public can't help but tune in." Such a comment removes events from their social and cultural context. "Celebrities" are endlessly marketed to the American public as the people that count, the *only* people that count, and the relentless bombardment, under conditions in which so many millions lead bleak and uninviting lives, has its impact.

But this should not be overstated. A mass movement of opposition to the establishment and the status quo generally is developing. The president, many of his officials, law enforcement and the rest are increasingly held in contempt by large numbers of people, who are openly standing up to

and resisting their dictates. A considerable number of “celebrities,” individuals who have actually earned popular respect for their genuine talents in many cases, are loudly denouncing the actions of their own government and its agencies. A healthy disrespect for the rich, for authority and for the official political system and culture is emerging. In other words, the stagnant, suffocating “celebrity culture” is beginning to fall apart.

In the overwhelming media response to the Guthrie case, there is also the inevitable element of deliberate social distraction. The various bourgeois news organizations welcome an incident like this, with its socially “neutral” character, a story that holds “human interest” for “everyone,” as a means of removing the focus from the Trump administration’s drive to war and dictatorship, the Democratic Party’s complicity, ICE’s crimes and killings, as well as the desperately painful economic conditions facing tens of millions. The American media always has the need to “change the subject,” because the “subject” is *always* threatening and ominous.

Moreover, we need to point out the vast difference in the depth of the coverage of the Guthrie kidnapping and that devoted to the thousands of abductions (and often deportations) of ordinary people by ICE and the rest of the fascist paramilitary apparatus set in motion by the Trump administration. These go largely unreported or vastly *under-reported* by the official outlets.

Simply to recount a few of these kidnappings or attacks.

Federal immigration agents forced open a door and detained US citizen ChongLy “Scott” Thao in his Minnesota home at gunpoint without a warrant, then led him out onto the streets in his underwear in subfreezing conditions, according to his family and videos reviewed by the Associated Press. Masked agents forced their way in and pointed guns at the family, yelling at them, Thao recalled. “I was shaking,” he said. “They didn’t show any warrant; they just broke down the door.”

Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents pulled Alberto Castañeda Mondragón from a friend’s car on January 8 outside a St. Paul shopping center and threw him to the ground, handcuffing him, then punching him and striking his head with a steel baton. He remembers being dragged into an SUV and taken to a detention facility, where he said he was beaten again.

In another episode, typical of many,

“Suddenly, four unmarked cars pulled up and surrounded (three individuals). The cars were large and black with tinted windows and had no license plates. The doors opened and men in masks with guns started running at them aggressively. One of the men had a ‘large’ military-style gun. The masked men wore regular clothes, they had no

visible badges, and they did not identify themselves.”

These agents have more in common with the members of Latin American death squads than even hardened criminals carrying out a desperate kidnapping.

In addition to the thousands of immigrants who have been assaulted, ProPublica found that 170 US “Citizens Have Been Held by Immigration Agents. They’ve Been Kicked, Dragged and Detained for Days.”

Among the detentions in which [ICE] allegations have not stuck, masked agents pointed a gun at, pepper sprayed and punched a young man who had filmed them searching for his relative. In another, agents knocked over and then tackled a 79-year-old car wash owner, pressing their knees into his neck and back. His lawyer said he was held for 12 hours and wasn’t given medical attention despite having broken ribs in the incident and having recently had heart surgery. In a third case, agents grabbed and handcuffed a woman on her way to work who was caught up in a chaotic raid on street vendors. In a complaint filed against the government, she described being held for more than two days, without being allowed to contact the outside world for much of that time.

These events are “sickening and deeply uncomfortable.” The society is indeed “supposed to protect the young and the old,” but it has ruthlessly and cruelly declared war on many of them. “How safe is anyone” under those conditions?

The cases noted here are only a few of the countless horror stories. Under which conditions will the US media become “captivated” by these frightening and tragic situations?



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