

The Undergraduate Journal of the Social Sciences

Interview Series

Richard Engel

Richard Engel recently visited West Point where he took time to share his expertise and insight with the UJSS.

Mr. Engel is known for his work as a war correspondent in Iraq from which he has reported both as a freelance contributor to ABC News during the U.S. invasion and NBC correspondent from May of 2003. Over more than twelve years in the Middle East, Engel has reported on the slums of Cairo, conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, and the present conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Engel has published his work in USA Today, Reuters, AFP, and Jane's Defense Weekly. Richard Engel is the author of "A Fist in the Hornet's Nest" and "War Journal: My Five Years in Iraq." The documentary "War-Zone Diary" chronicles Engel's coverage of the Iraq War.

Richard Engel is a recipient of the 2008 Alfred I. DuPont Colombia University Award, the Medill Medal for Courage in Journalism, an Emmy, and the Edward R. Murrow award.

Engel is both literate and fluent in Arabic and speaks a number of regional dialects of the language, in addition to Italian and Spanish. He holds a B.A. in International Relations from Stanford University.

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UJSS: Where do you draw your motivation, what is the source of your passion?

Richard Engel: “How do I start? I have been living in the Middle East for a long time. I have been living in the Middle East since 1996. I moved over there after graduating from college because I wanted to be a journalist. I wanted to be part of history. I think many people in this institution (West Point) have a similar motivation: that they want to be part of history; they want to have an impact on it. They want to be engaged. It is hard to watch the world revolve around you without stepping in and being part of the world. I wanted to be able to travel. I want to be able to look at the events, as they are unfolding. I want to be in the front car in the train of history. Furthermore, I thought journalism was a good vehicle for that, and so far, it has been.”

UJSS: Why Journalism? Was there someone along the way in your life that pointed you in that direction?

Engel: “No one pointed me in the direction of journalism; people have mentored me along the way since then. When I was in college at Stanford I knew I wanted to be a reporter. My thoughts were, ‘Should I be a domestic reporter or a foreign correspondent? How do I make this work?’ To solve this problem, I took about \$2,000 and I decided I am going to be a foreign correspondent. I am going to go overseas. I looked at the map. It was 1996. If it was 1986, I would have gone to Russia, or Poland. It was 1996, and I thought the Middle East would be the story of our times. I packed up a few of my things, and I took my \$2,000 and left for Cairo. I lived in a very broken-down neighborhood. It was a seven-story walk up in a very ramshackle area. I learned Arabic, and I lived in Cairo. I started to report.”

“Many of people I was living with at the time in the neighborhood were people who would be considered in Islamic radical groups. They were very friendly to me, by the way. They were very curious as to why this American would be living in their neighborhood; I was the only foreigner there. They were friendly but curious. They watched me and had many questions. They were not threatening in anyway. I ultimately lived in Cairo for four years, and I got involved in an issue that would later become a very big story. It had the same theories and philosophies and ideas about America and Israel and Jews and the Mossad that we hear today. It looks like it was Al-Qaeda I was listening to from my neighbors in 1996, and I became very involved in these kinds of organizations. I was not involved *with* these organizations but got involved in learning about them. I started to report for military magazines like Jane’s Defence Weekly. I became one of their Middle East correspondents, and I wrote a country profile of Egypt. It happened to be focused on Islamic radicalism. The Egyptian government thought this was very unusual. They started following me; they accused me of being a spy, CIA station chief. I was arrested half a dozen times, but I stayed there and started reporting.”

“After about four years in Cairo, I moved to Jerusalem. I covered the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The situation obviously was similar in nature to what I had dealt with in Egypt. For instance, I dealt with the Palestinian uprising, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas, which were again, similar kinds of movements. In 2002, the war in Iraq was about to start. I thought, ‘Well, this is why I came to the region in the very beginning.’ This is why I moved to [the region] in ’96. I knew there would be an event that would change the entire way the United States is perceived in the Middle East and the way the Middle East operates. This time I took \$20,000 cash and put it in my socks. I took off for Baghdad. I was not embedded with any one or attached to any particular unit. I was living in Iraq. I lived in Iraqi homes or wherever I happened to find a bed. I watched the U.S. invasion. I was on the receiving end of the shock and awe. I was a freelancer at the time. Yet, it was mostly filing for ABC and Peter Jennings. Then I was hired by NBC, [they] saw me on [their] rival network and wanted to know where I came from.”

‘How is he in Baghdad?’ ‘We don’t have anyone in Baghdad?’ I was the only American television reporter in Iraq. I was not with US Forces. I now had the exclusive to the Iraq war.”

“NBC said, ‘We’ll take it.’ They hired me, and sent me right back to work. I spent the next five years in Iraq, and then I moved to Lebanon. It just so happened that two weeks after I moved to Lebanon the war between Israel and Hezbollah broke out. Now I spend a lot of my time going between Pakistan and Afghanistan.”



UJSS: From your experiences, what do you think are the root causes of anti-Western and anti-American animosity in the Middle East?

Engel: “Why do they hate us? It is complicated. There are a variety of reasons. Some has to do with ignorance. Some has to do with what you could call ‘willful ignorance.’ I would explain this as, when the government deliberately encourages a culture of conspiracy theories and a culture of lies and propaganda.”

“In Egypt for example, if you go to a slum a lot of people on the street will be very anti-American. They will all have the same 5, 10 and 15 examples that they will site. For instance, the U.S. support for Israel at the expense of the Palestinians, that the United States is on a campaign or a crusade against Islam, that the United States is out to suck the region of its oil wealth, and set up a neocolonial like empire in the region are all examples they would cite in their hatred. They would describe conspiracy theories that involved a small group of Jews masterminding all these acts based in New York and in Washington, D.C. These are generally the same theories that you hear all the time. Some of it is ignorance. Some of it is this concept of willful ignorance in which the government actually encourages it as a philosophy. It is easy, and it is socially convenient for many states in the Middle East to encourage it. I think our policy in the Middle East has been misguided at times. Thus, there are some legitimate grievances. The Palestinians have a legitimate grievance. The war in Iraq created a lot of casualties which is a legitimate grievance.”

“There is usually truth in certain grievances that in turn get blown out of proportion. Lastly, the Internet has made this hatred explosively pervasive. When I was there in 1996, I could go and this would be the talk at the local barbershop. People would all talk about the Jews, and the Americans,

the Middle East and the Islam. They would all get themselves worked up into a state of frenzy, but it stayed there. Now, they have an enormous social network online. People can exchange ideas, set whole online communities that are based around this culture of conspiracies, some [of it is] lies and a lot of it as anti-American propaganda.”

UJSS: How do we combat radical extremism?

Engel: “I think you have to look very closely at what our policies are in the Middle East. I think working toward an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement would do a lot. I think you have to try to draw down the casualties in the Middle East. I spoke with a very senior counter-terrorism expert. He was a counter-terrorism adviser to the White House and he said to me, ‘Richard the basic problem is in the last 8 years for a variety of reasons, we’ve killed too many Muslims.’ I am not saying it was a deliberate policy. In fact, I do not think it was deliberate. The end result of having two major wars in the Muslim world is that there are many casualties. We need to look at the two main foreign policy challenges that are there and do a better job in reaching out. I think some of the initiatives trying to reach out, over the last several years, have been laughable; the State Department information campaigns have not succeeded. They have not been very aggressive or particularly well thought out.”

UJSS: How do we withdraw from Iraq and return sovereignty to the Iraqi people without creating a propaganda victory for Al Qaeda?

Engel: “There already is a road map for an exit strategy in Iraq. It is about to be in front of the Iraq parliament on Wednesday, the Status of Forces Agreement. It very specifically lays out what the new US mission in Iraq would be. It says that by June 30 of 2009, US troops will be out of the major cities in Iraq. They will be confined to bases unless they have a mission of self defense or a specific operation that has been approved and coordinated with the Iraqi government.”

“On December 31st the current UN mandate for Iraq expires. So, after December 31st there is no legal framework the US forces to be in Iraq. I have spoken with the US Ambassador he said, ‘Unless we have something, we don’t move.’”



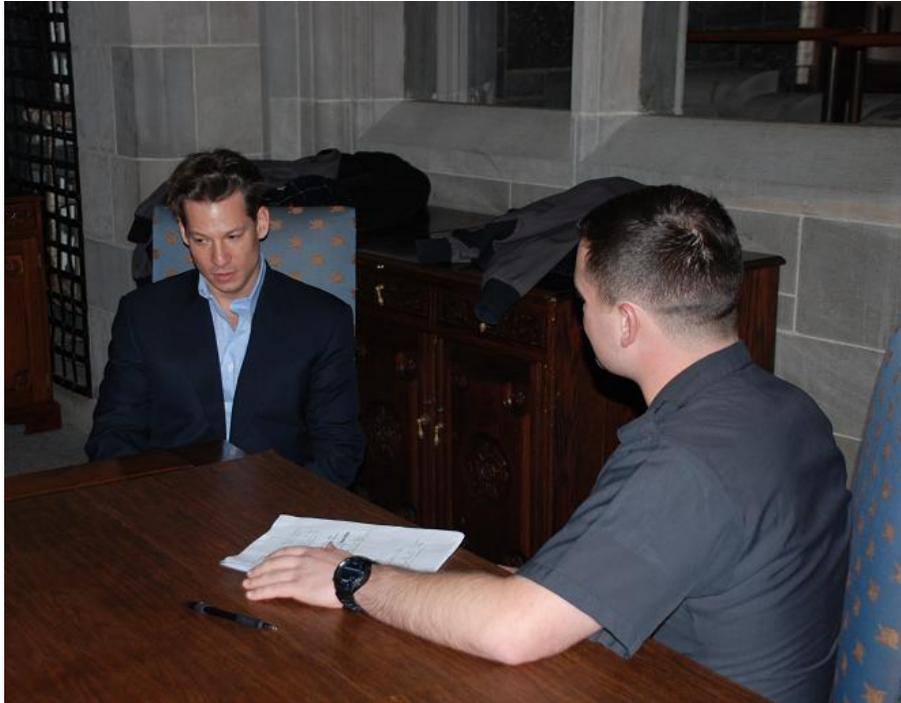
“We are not going out on patrol. We are not doing anything. We do nothing. No more training. Everything will be halted. Obviously that depends on them but generally they are not doing any mission in Iraq after December 31. That does not benefit anybody.”

“They are trying to come up with a new bilateral arrangement. It is problematic. It defines a new US role that is not a combat role that is a training mission. So, you will have troop reductions. We now have about 140,000 troops. It is going down over time. This agreement says, ‘all combat forces [will] be out of Iraq by 2012.’ It would leave some residual number of troops that would not be combat forces. They would be logistics and support troops. Thus, it becomes a training mission. Is that a good mission? Is that the kind of mission that the US, that young leaders from people hear at West Point want to be involved in? Is it a mission that the United States can afford right now? Can the U.S. afford to have tens of thousands of troops sitting over under the control of the Iraqi government, which has proven repeatedly to be unreliable and corrupt? “

“Is that a mission that we want to be a part of as a nation? Do you as future commanders want to be part of that mission? That is the question I cannot answer, but that is the exit strategy. That is where we are going. If the country falls apart dramatically then there are many problems with sitting in bases in Iraq. For instance, hypothetically let us say you are stuck on a base. The country is falling apart. Al-Qaeda is on the rise. It is getting stronger. The Iraqi government is drawing you in and now you do not have as many forces. You have lost the momentum. You are fighting through partners. It is a hard position to be in.”

UJSS: What advice do you have for future combat leaders in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Engel: “Read and understand where you are going. Read as many books as you can that have been written on the subject. There have been many articles written. Understand the mission that you are going in to. If you are going to Iraq, your mission is going to be basically one of training and holding on to the gains that we have incurred. You will also have to navigate your way through the political minefield of letting the Iraqi’s take credit for things. You will have to operate in the shadows, operating from behind the scenes, running the Iraqi security forces by remote control from a base. It will be difficult and will take a certain personality.”



“If you are going to Afghanistan, it is a newer conflict because it is a dynamic base. You will potentially be at an outpost in which we are the only people on that outpost. Possibly one platoon, eating MREs, dealing with the freezing cold and there are really no Afghan allies that you would be working with. Whereas Iraq would be the opposite, mostly they are doing the work and you are trying to guide it and shape them. The terrain is totally different.”

“I think you have to understand where you are going and what the purpose is. What do you want to accomplish out of it? And look at where you are in the game in Iraq and in Afghanistan. In Iraq I think there have been five separate wars. There was the invasion phase, shock and awe. Then there was the nation-building phase. Then there was the insurgency phase that started in around April 2004 and lasted for almost two years. From April 2004 to February 2006 you had an insurgency. The Sunnis were fighting against the Americans and against the Shias because they realize that this new American project was not in their favor. Then from 2006 to the summer of 2007 you had a civil war. This was where the Shias decided to fight back. You had civilians attacking civilians, militia groups, bodies in the streets and you have the surge. So, the five would be the invasion with a 21 day march to Baghdad to topple the government. Nation building was one year in which quite a lot of mistakes were made. Then came the insurgency where the Sunni’s realized they are losing. Then they decided to attack the Americans. Then the civil war where the Shia fight back.”
“Now, we are in war number six which is the exit strategy. We are leaving Iraq. We are going to a training mission. We are going to an advisory role and hopefully we can hold on to the gains that

have been achieved so far. So, when going in, recognize where you are going. In Afghanistan, we are starting all over. We are back at square one. We are going into the fighting phase again.”

UJSS: Some believe that a civil war is still occurring and if we exit, this will erupt and possibly spread to the surrounding nations; what is your opinion on that?

Engel: “I think that is a very legitimate concern. We have to look at the stages where we have the first phase ‘shock and awe,’ then nation building, insurgency, civil war. The civil war only lasted from about February 2006, which is the Samara attack. It began a little bit before that but let us say starting at 2006 to mid 2007; it only ran its course for about a year and a half. If the surge is removed was that one and a half year civil war phase enough? Did it need another year or two? It is a good question. And that we will see. Iraqis do not want to go back to that phase. They do not want to go back to 2006. They are terrified of it. But sometimes things happen, often times things people do not want.”



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