

Riding the Train of History

Richard Engel

Chief Foreign Correspondent, NBC News

In the 20 years that Richard Engel has been reporting from the Middle East, he has covered everything from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the uprisings in Egypt, Syria, Libya, Tunisia, Bahrain, and Yemen that defined the Arab Spring. From combat zones, through tear gas, and in the midst of revolutions and rebellions, he has not only shown us world-shaping events as they happen, but provided context that helps us understand how and why they occurred. Engel has received numerous awards for his reporting, including the Medill Medal for Courage in Journalism, the Daniel Pearl Award, two Peabody Awards, two Edward R. Murrow Awards, and six Emmys. He is the author of three books: *A Fist in the Hornet's Nest*; *War Journal: My Five Years in Iraq*; and *And Then All Hell Broke Loose: Two Decades in the Middle East*.



NBC NEWS

Birth of a journalist

I was about 13 years old when I first had the idea of becoming a journalist. I was on a trip to Morocco with my parents, and every day at our hotel in Marrakesh, the hotel staff would deliver the *International Herald Tribune* to our door. I hadn't been that exposed to international affairs, and I didn't read the newspaper regularly, but since it was there, I was reading through it. Reading all these amazing things about world

affairs—about art exhibits in European cities and about natural disasters in countries that I was unfamiliar with—was a window I had never looked through before. When my mother found me reading this newspaper, she said, “I can see you working for them one day.” I thought it would be really fun to be a foreign correspondent living in exotic places and traveling and digging into stories of international intrigue and mystery.

When I was in high school, I did a year-abroad program in Palermo, Sicily, through AFS. I spent my junior year there and found it amazingly fascinating and fun, and

I really got the international bug. The seed was planted when I was in Morocco, and it started to bloom in high school, and then it became a lifelong pursuit after I graduated college.

Finding my story

After college, I took \$2,000 and a couple of suitcases and moved to Cairo. It was a strategic choice. It was 1996 and the Cold War was over, the Soviet Union had collapsed, and we were living in what was sometimes called a multipolar world, where power and influence weren't concentrated as they'd been in the old paradigm. In this multipolar world of competing interests, threats, and challenges, I thought the Middle East was going to emerge as the story of my generation. I thought the breakdown of the old system would allow the underlying cracks and fissures of the region's religious and ethnic conflicts to become more evident. Had it been 1986 I probably would've gone to Russia or Poland. Had it been 1946 maybe I would've gone to post-war Europe, to Paris or Berlin. But in 1996, I thought the Middle East was going to emerge as a giant story.

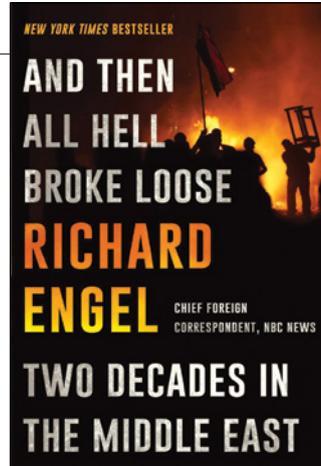
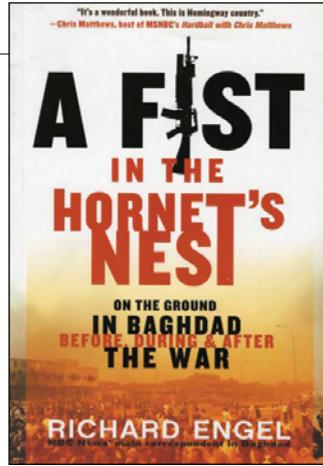
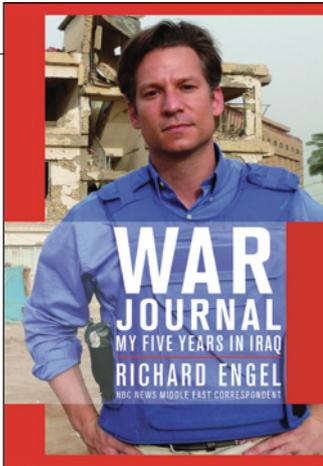
In real time

I think the job of a journalist is to go to places in transition—where the political system has just collapsed or is going through transformation, or where there is an economic, religious, or political upheaval—and make sense of how it's happening. It's like the earth's plates. They're locked in position and then suddenly they shift.

And our job as journalists is to go to those places where the cracks have just surfaced and tell the world, This is what's happened. This is the consequence for civilians, this is the consequence for the new political dynamic, this is what it's going to mean for the United States. We have to try to make sense of rapidly developing events in real time.

Calm in a storm

Arriving at an airport in a European city is not the same as arriving in a country that is in the midst of a revolution. Often I'm arriving in a place where I don't exactly know what I'm going to find when I get to the airport. Are there going to be cars there? Is there even going to be an airport? Will there be electricity? Can I really trust the people I think I know? Can I communicate with them? Do I have a way to pay them? Are the banks operating? I run through an enormous checklist every time I travel.



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All these logistics are also safety mechanisms. If you go into a country in transition or a city in turmoil, you can anticipate the 10 or 15 things that are going to be a problem. And you become comfortable with managing uncertainty. You learn not to become caught up in the turmoil, but to operate through it.

Self-reliance

I went to Nepal after the earthquake a couple of years ago. When I landed at the airport, there was a tremendous aftershock, and everyone ran away. I was standing in the arrivals hall with my carry-on bag and suddenly all the customs officials and all the immigration officials had run away. I had to make a lot of decisions on the spot: Do I leave this building? Do I enter the country without stamping my passport? If I do, how will I leave again?

I was in Libya when the Gaddafi regime was collapsing. Libya was falling to rebel groups, there were militias running around the city, there were explosions going off, there was artillery landing, and it was unclear who was even firing it. It could have been the rebels firing somewhat at random, or it could've been the Gaddafi regime firing to defend itself. Certain neighborhoods had fallen, others hadn't. Our driver—with our gear in the car—got spooked and drove off. We had no vehicle, everybody was gone, and it was the middle of the night.

In situations like these, no one is coming to get you. The person to your left and to your right and your own experience and wits are what will get you through.

Home, in context

When I come back to the states to visit family and friends,

people ask me, "Is it hard for you to adjust?" and "Is it awkward to come back here?" I've been doing this long enough that I don't necessarily make the distinction between there and here anymore. There are political events there, and there are political events here, and I don't always see them as separate.

The turmoil that the U.S. is going through right now in the electoral system is not completely dissimilar to the turmoil that is going on in Europe with the Brexit vote or the immigration challenges and the rise of some populist parties, so I see it as a continuum. I don't think of it as there and here so much. They're all just stories. They're all just tectonic plates that are shifting.

Find your story

Read, read, read. Read as much as you can, and not just Facebook and Twitter. Read newspapers, read magazines, be as familiar as you can with the world around you. *The Economist* is a great magazine and you don't even need to read the whole thing. Read the first half, and especially the sections on Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East. If you do that for a year, you'll be far more informed than half of the American public.

If you want to be a journalist or want to pursue any kind of career with an international focus, look at the map, look at the world you're living in, and try to imagine what the world is going to look like over the next 10 or 20 years. What are going to be the big stories? What are going to be the big trends? I like to use the train of history as an analogy. If you want to get onboard the train, you have to figure out where the next stops might be. ■

Learn more about Richard Engel at nbcnews.com/pages/author/richard-engel.