

Rolling Stone's retraction of University of Virginia gang rape story

By David Walsh
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On April 5, in a major and well-deserved humiliation, *Rolling Stone* magazine, the US biweekly devoted primarily to popular culture, was forced to retract its story “A Rape on Campus: A Brutal Assault and Struggle for Justice at UVA,” published November 19, 2014. The 9,000-word piece reported as fact the claims of “Jackie,” a female student at the University of Virginia (UVA), about a horrific gang rape alleged to have taken place in September 2012 at a fraternity house on the campus in Charlottesville, Virginia.

The sensationalist article, by Sabrina Rubin Erdely, caused an uproar. Major publications such as the *New York Times*, including its columnist Nicholas Kristof, and the *Washington Post*, along with the entire crowd of pseudo-left and feminist activists, leaped on the story, asserting that it confirmed the existence of a “rape culture” in the US and on college campuses in particular. The obvious inconsistencies and implausibilities in the *Rolling Stone* “exposé,” however, impelled other journalists, including some at the *Post*, to look further into the allegations. The article’s claims began to unravel within a few weeks of publication, with *Rolling Stone* editors noting “discrepancies” and backing away from the story on December 5.

On December 11, the WSWWS described the piece as “a defamatory travesty of journalism,” adding: “The article, in fact, is a mass of unsubstantiated allegations and anecdotes, stereotypes and dubious statistics. There is almost nothing in the article that can be pinned down as fact. It is neither convincing nor believable.”

As a damage control measure, *Rolling Stone* management eventually commissioned Steve Coll, dean of the Columbia School of Journalism, and two colleagues, to investigate the writing and publication of “A Rape on Campus.” The release of their results Sunday evening prompted the magazine’s retraction. In another response to the report, the Virginia Alpha Chapter of Phi Kappa Psi, the fraternity in question, announced plans Monday to launch a lawsuit against *Rolling Stone*, accusing the magazine of “reckless reporting.”

The Columbia inquiry (available online here) documents *Rolling Stone*’s failure to apply the most elementary journalistic standards and procedures.

The report argues that the magazine’s “repudiation of the main narrative in ‘A Rape on Campus’ is a story of journalistic failure that was avoidable. The failure encompassed reporting, editing, editorial supervision and fact-checking. The magazine set aside or

rationalized as unnecessary essential practices of reporting that, if pursued, would likely have led the magazine’s editors to reconsider publishing Jackie’s narrative so prominently, if at all. The published story glossed over the gaps in the magazine’s reporting by using pseudonyms and by failing to state where important information had come from.”

In fact, the lengthy and inflammatory article was published on the say-so of one young person, with virtually no corroborating facts. For example, Jackie said she had spoken to three friends the night of the alleged attack, September 29, 2012, and told them she had been sexually assaulted. However, Jackie asserted that the three had later turned against her, and Jackie discouraged Erdely from contacting them. The reporter made no serious effort to get in touch with these key witnesses. When they were eventually contacted, the trio contradicted Jackie’s story in important ways. Coll and his colleagues comment: “The episode reaffirms a truism of reporting: Checking derogatory information with subjects is a matter of fairness, but it can also produce surprising new facts.”

Erdely never provided Phi Kappa Psi the details of the alleged assault, including its date. The Columbia report notes that if *Rolling Stone* “had given the fraternity a chance to review the allegations in detail, the factual discrepancies the fraternity would likely have reported might have led Erdely and her editors to try to verify Jackie’s account more thoroughly.”

Similarly, incredible as it may seem, Erdely and *Rolling Stone* accepted Jackie’s refusal to provide them with the name of the supposed ringleader of the attack, a lifeguard at the university aquatic center she claimed had asked her out on a date that night.

“There was, in fact, an aquatic center lifeguard who had worked at the pool at the same time as Jackie and had the first name she had used freely with Erdely. He was not a member of Phi Kappa Psi, however. The police interviewed him and examined his personal records. They found no evidence to link him to Jackie’s assault.

“If *Rolling Stone* had located him and heard his response to Jackie’s allegations...this might have led Erdely to reconsider her focus on that case. In any event, *Rolling Stone* stopped looking for him.”

These failures to establish the basic facts of the case—even as to whether the alleged ringleader actually existed!—are so egregious that they hardly permit an innocent explanation. Either *Rolling Stone*, in existence for almost five decades and with a readership of 1.5 million per issue, is run by complete amateurs or

incompetents, or, more plausibly, something else is at work. That “something else,” in this case, is the gravitational pull of identity politics and the upper middle class circles obsessed with sex, gender and race. The rational and objective consideration of facts flies out the window when these fixated layers perceive their interests to be at stake.

Erdely’s own notes from a July 2014 conversation with a UVA staff member, commented on by the Columbia report, reveal “she was searching for a single, emblematic college rape case that would show ‘what it’s like to be on campus now...where not only is rape so prevalent but also that there’s this pervasive culture of sexual harassment/rape culture.’”

The Columbia report is extremely narrow, limiting itself to the immediate facts of the case. It never asks the obvious: how was such a “journalistic failure” possible? In fact, the authors of the report accept the essential ideological framework within which the *Rolling Stone* article was produced. They bend over backward to offer excuses for Erdely and company: “Social scientists, psychologists and trauma specialists who support rape survivors have impressed upon journalists the need to respect the autonomy of victims, to avoid re-traumatizing them and to understand that rape survivors are as reliable in their testimony as other crime victims. These insights clearly influenced Erdely, [and editors Sean] Woods and [Will] Dana.”

This is nonsense. The issue is not whether rape is a terrible crime. What’s taking place, however, is not a sudden outpouring of sympathy for sexual assault victims, in the face of an epidemic, on the part of the government, the media and university officials. In fact, a layer of right-wing political scoundrels, in and around the Democratic Party, is cynically making use of an emotive and painful issue to advance its own agenda.

The Columbia investigation notes the role of the White House in this process: “The Obama administration took up the cause [of sexual harassment on campus]. It pressured colleges to adopt more rigorous systems, and it required a lower threshold of guilt to convict a student before school tribunals.”

As we noted last November in regard to Harvard University’s new, anti-democratic sexual misconduct policy: “Obama’s sexual assault publicity stunt is directed in particular at shoring up support for the Democrats among those liberal and ‘left’ layers of the upper middle class mesmerized by questions of personal identity.”

The “progressive agenda” today of the affluent left includes and hardly goes farther than support for gay marriage, opposition to the “rape culture” and an obsession with race. All of this is meant to divert attention from the crimes of the White House and the relentless attacks on the working class in the US. The hysteria over supposedly widespread rape in the US and elsewhere is part of the effort to bamboozle some people and intimidate others.

For certain selfish layers, Obama’s initiative on sexual assault on campuses far outweighs his role in murdering thousands through drone strikes, ordering NSA spying and launching undeclared wars in various parts of the globe.

The “Rape on Campus” incident is a fiasco for *Rolling Stone*. However, the publication has made clear it has no plans to dispense with Erdely’s services or anyone else’s, and that it is

quite happy with the “safeguards” in place. Everything will go as before, including the editors’ devotion to identity politics.

After apologizing in a perfunctory manner to “all of those who were damaged by our story and the ensuing fallout, including members of the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity and UVA administrators and students,” the magazine goes on to worry about the impact its article might have on similar allegations in the future: “It is important that rape victims feel comfortable stepping forward. It saddens us to think that their willingness to do so might be diminished by our failings.”

Along the same lines, the Columbia report authors write: “It would be unfortunate if *Rolling Stone*’s failure were to deter journalists from taking on high-risk investigations of rape in which powerful individuals or institutions may wish to avoid scrutiny but where the facts may be underdeveloped.”

“Rape culture” advocates like Jessica Valenti of the *Guardian*, formerly of the *Nation*, will certainly not be deterred. After the Charlottesville Police Department issued a report March 23 indicating that it had “exhausted all investigative leads” and concluding “that there is no substantive basis to support the account alleged in the Rolling Stone article,” Valenti insightfully commented, “‘No evidence’ of a rape does not mean that a rape didn’t happen” and referred to the police merely finding “inconsistencies” in Jackie’s story. In fact, the police found no basis whatsoever not only for the allegation of a crime in 2012, but for other incidents the young woman initially reported.

The UVA incident has to be seen in the context of the ongoing assault on democratic and constitutional rights in the US, spearheaded by the Obama administration and acquiesced to by the pseudo-left. Neither in *Rolling Stone*’s apology nor the Columbia report do the critical questions of democratic rights, including the presumption of innocence and due process, come up. Allegations of sexual misconduct are treated as fact, unless a debacle like the present one makes that untenable. The implications are profound.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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