

Ethical Leadership

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Edward Snowden

Introduction

The story of Edward Snowden elicits strong reactions on both sides of the question: Is he a hero or a traitor?

Edward Snowden, in full **Edward Joseph Snowden**, (born June 21, 1983, [Elizabeth City, North Carolina](#), U.S.), American [intelligence](#) contractor who in 2013 revealed the existence of secret wide-ranging information-gathering programs conducted by the [National Security Agency](#) (NSA). (Ray, 2020)

His Story

Through a series of events, he became curious about the degree of surveillance that the US was involved in ... here on our own shores. In his own words,

“We have an internal strategy at the NSA, which was never publicly avowed, but it was all over their top-secret internal slides, that said the aspiration was to "collect it all." What this means was they were not just collecting and intercepting communications from criminals, spies, terrorists, people of intelligence value — they were collecting on everyone, everywhere, all of the time, just in case, because you never know what's going to be interesting.”

Edward Snowden says he has been driven by his bothered conscience over what he discovered. He supposedly revealed secretive classified documents only to the Press. According to Snowden, he made them agree to disclose to the government what they were going to release to the public when they decided what to publish or what NOT to publish. He claims he was very serious about this and that he was not a part of any publisher's process. Though he states that no

one has been harmed by his actions, according to an NPR finding, the government asserts a contrary position¹. According to Polantz, a 2013 public complaint was issued in which from Federal Prosecutors are charging him with “theft of government property and unauthorized communication of national defense and classified information”. (Polantz, 2020)

To the Press, he is a heroic whistleblower. Indeed, this is how he sees himself. But to the US Government, he is a traitor who is guilty of violating secrecy agreements. They have only one question:

“The only thing the jury gets to consider is did you tell the journalists something you were not allowed to tell them. If yes, it doesn't matter why you did it. You go to jail.”

— Snowden, describing the Gov't's position on his return to the U.S. (Briger, 2019)

Many believe he is a modern saint. Maybe he is. According to his lawyers, since he has been in Russia, he has earned millions from lectures and a lucrative book (and movie) deal².

Conclusion

In consequence of Snowden's actions, President Obama, who was a strong critic of Snowden at first, ordered an independent investigation in August 2013 into U.S. surveillance systems. This panel, three months later, recommended that “the mass collection of telephone records be suspended and advised greater oversight of sensitive programs, such as those targeting friendly foreign leaders”. President Obama did take action on a number of their suggestions.

There still remains much contention between the NSA and privacy advocates. The newspapers

1 (**Editor's note:** A [2016 report](#) by the House intelligence committee cited more than 20 examples of which, it said, Snowden damaged national security. The details of those instances were redacted.) Briger, 2019

2 Snowden, who lives in Russia, had earned \$4.2 million from his book sales, royalties and related rights as of this month. He gave 56 paid speeches that included disclosures that breached his government secrecy agreement, according to the court filing from his lawyers in the US and the Justice Department. In all, Snowden made about \$1.03 million from the speeches, with an average speaking fee of \$18,000. (Polantz, 2020)

involved with Snowden's revelations both received Pulitzer Prizes - which gave to Snowden some sense of vindication.

My perception of Snowden has been greatly changed by this research into his life and activities. I still have reservations about some of his actions, but I am feeling less a critic (though not yet a cheering fan) of the man in exile. Our rights to privacy are so important to all of our freedoms as citizens of this nation. His actions seem to be genuinely illegal. In the case of agricultural (food industry) protections, a violation of law in the service of the greater good of consumers seems reasonable and appreciated. But in Snowden's case, I still fear that the Nation's secrets ought not be disclosed to other sovereign powers. Once released, how safe are these "classified" documents? Maybe that were ALL limited to unconstitutional surveillance, and if that is the case, the nation can breathe easier. Is this something that sets a precedent for future workers with high levels of clearance? I don't agree that the end justifies the means. In this case, I am reserving final judgment for a later date. For now, I will wait and see.

References:

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Edward Snowden Speaks Out: 'I Haven't And I Won't' Cooperate With Russia, 2019

Sam Briger and Thea Chaloner produced and edited the audio of this interview. <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/19/761918152/exiled-nsa-contractor-edward-snowden-i-haven-t-and-i-won-t-cooperate-with-russia>