A Special Double Issue

Citizen Snowden: Why he matters

WHO KNEW THAT 1984 WAS A HOW-TO MANUAL?
Of course, George Orwell did not intend for his novel about life in a dystopian, totalitarian society to be a blueprint for a secret surveillance state. Yet, unbeknownst to us supposedly sovereign US citizens, a cabal of militarists, corporate contractors, a handful of in-the-know politicos, and some Rambo-esque intelligence operatives appear to have been ripping pages right out of 1984 to guide their clandestine creation of just such a despotic mechanism deep within our own government. To do it, they have employed such Orwellian concepts as perpetual war, newspeak, doublethink, memory hole, and thoughtcrime.

Since 2001, under both the Bush and Obama presidencies, this coterie has quietly (but very aggressively) transformed the obscure National Security Agency into a $52 billion-per-year, super-secret, all-seeing, all-grabbing, electronic spy matrix of breathtaking size and power. Operating behind the dark curtain of the hyperbolic “war on terror,” the legitimate security mission of NSA has been perverted from protecting the American people to one of maintaining constant, non-blinking, computer-driven surveillance of the people themselves. Every minute of every day, the agency’s watchers, armed with electronic weapons of mass espionage, routinely reach right through our Bill of Rights, intruding into and storing information about your, my, and everyone else’s private affairs—not to mention doing the same to the people and leaders of our closest allied nations.

This has nothing to do with terrorism or making us more secure. It’s about power:

- The power of today’s largely privatized spy establishment to turn public fear into a roaring waterfall of government contracts awarded, often on a no-bid basis, to corporate profiteers.
- The power of highly advanced digital technologies and cyber-security toys to dazzle policymakers, setting up a technological imperative: “Because superfast supercomputers now make it possible to do whole-nation, vacuum-sweeping surveillance, we should do it. Indeed, we must.”
- The arrogance of power, an arrogance that grows like kudzu in the insular, autocratically inclined spook culture. Macho spymasters have no patience with “outsiders” questioning either the specifics or the morality of anything they do, for the company credo says that everything they do is justified, ad infinitum, by their all-encompassing mantra: “We are protecting America from another 9/11.” Nothing—not even the Constitution—can be allowed to stand in the way of their heroic mission.

Down the rabbit hole

We still wouldn’t know about any of this, except that Edward Snowden, a 30-year-old NSA whistleblower, who had expert computer skills and top-security clearance, dared to download a mass of internal, electronic documents and make them public last year by giving them to respected investigative reporters. For eight months now, we have absorbed one explosive story after another from those reporters, all based on NSA’s own records, about the skull-duggery being committed non-stop in our names. Many more exposés will flow this year from the Snowden trove of some 1.7 million documents. Taken together, they make clear that we no longer live in the America that was, in Lincoln’s phrase, “conceived in liberty.”

Okay, let’s take a couple of deep breaths here and recognize that the USA is nowhere near the soul-crushing, mind-controlling, authoritarian regime of Orwell’s imagination. But what We The People need to confront is the fact that NSAs technologies of algorithmic, full-spectrum surveillance have been turned on us,
creating a continuous watch that inevitably will be abusive and is inherently un-American. To the growing astonishment of the general public, thousands of NSA analysts (like Snowden) can and do—with the click of a mouse—Hoover up any American’s personal information, along with our constitutional guarantee to be free of “unreasonable searches and seizures.”

So, while we’ve not yet plummeted kersplat into the full depth of Orwell’s 1984, that is the dark and dangerous rabbit hole that the techno-spies have tripped America into. Consider just three indicators of how far down we’ve already tumbled:

- **The US government’s enthusiasm** for punishing domestic dissidents is so notorious worldwide that, last July, Attorney General Eric Holder actually had to put in writing an official assurance that “Mr. Snowden will not be tortured” if he comes home. “Torture is unlawful in the United States,” the AG deadpanned, as if saying that means our leaders don’t do it, which prompted guffaws around the world.

- **Last year, on Dec. 5**, the National Reconnaissance Office (one of NSA’s many surveillance “partners”) launched an Atlas V rocket carrying a spy satellite into orbit, positioning yet another eye-in-the-sky to keep track of us earthlings. What was unique about this payload, however, was that it bore an unusually candid logo flaunting the spy establishment’s overweening attitude toward your and my personal liberties. The emblem portrays our globe being wholly enwrapped by the tentacles of a monstrous octopus, and (in case anyone might miss the symbolism of a world-sucking cephalopod) the illustration is underscored by this menacing motto: “NOTHING IS BEYOND OUR REACH.”

- **With only a handful of exceptions**, members of Congress were kept as clueless as we commoners were about the secret agency’s intrusive communications of seemingly everyone, everywhere. Finally, it dawned on some members that—wait a minute—“everyone” could include us! On Jan. 2, Sen. Bernie Sanders dared to ask agency officials: “Has the NSA spied, or is the NSA currently spying, on members of Congress or other American elected officials?” As usual, the spooks tried to play dodgeball: “Members of Congress have the same privacy protections as all US persons,” a functionary responded, unresponsively. “NSA is fully committed to transparency with Congress,” the agent blathered on, “and we will continue to work to ensure that all members of Congress, including Senator Sanders, have information about NSA’s mission, authorities, and programs to fully inform the discharge of their duties.” (Actually, if you decode this blah-blah-blah, it inadvertently amounts to a candid response: We have the same respect for the privacy of lawmakers as we do for every other citizen—none—so yes, count yourself as spied upon.)

The Grover Norquisters who say they hate “Big Gubbmint” should focus on this behemoth that has arisen so suddenly in our midst. To call NSA big, enormous, gargantuan, etc., doesn’t even begin to describe its physical presence, much less its intrusive reach. Headquartered at Fort Meade, Maryland, just off the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, spook central operates from a sprawl of unmarked buildings and bunkers on an almost eight-square-mile campus. The facility is nearly 10 times the size of the Pentagon. At night, it’s bathed in an otherworldly yellow-orange-ish security light, making the place look every bit as menacing as its mission.

**Reporting inconvenient secret truths about what the government and its corporate contractors are doing is not a crime. It is what real journalists are supposed to do.**

**DoSomething!** Info, contacts, and action

Several organizations are challenging the government about its domestic spying programs. You can get information on how to help from the following groups:

- **American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)** Campaign to stop illegal domestic spying: [www.aclu.org/spy-files](http://www.aclu.org/spy-files)
- **Electronic Privacy Information Center**: [www.epic.org](http://www.epic.org)
- **Freedom of Press Foundation**: [www.pressfreedomfoundation.org](http://www.pressfreedomfoundation.org)
- **Center for Constitutional Rights**: [www.corjustice.org](http://www.corjustice.org)
- **People’s Campaign for the Constitution**: [www.constitutioncampaign.org](http://www.constitutioncampaign.org)
- **Electronic Frontier Foundation**: [www.eff.org/nsa-spying](http://www.eff.org/nsa-spying)

Check out the “Do Something” box, and let’s put an end this assault on our rights.
Senate and House “intelligence”?

IN JANUARY, SEN. DIANNE FEINSTEIN, chair of the intelligence committee, teamed up with her House counterpart, Rep. Mike Rogers, to do a version of the old Joe McCarthy Red Scare shtick.

Without offering an iota of evidence or citing any sources, the Dianne & Mike comedy team declared on NBC’s Meet the Press that they suspect Snowden was working as a spy for Russia, even while he was employed as a data analyst at NSA. How is it, wondered the perpetually dumbfounded Rogers on national television, that the dissenter “ended up in the hands” of Moscow?

Hello. Did he not know that Snowden had been deliberately trapped there by our government, which stripped him of his passport and threatened all Western governments against granting him sanctuary? Then Feinstein, asked directly if she thought the leaker had ties to Russian commies, said evasively: “He may well have.”

Good grief. These are our intelligence leaders? As an ACLU official said of the Feinstein-Rogers charge: “It’s not only false. It’s silly.”

Fort Meade, however, is not the extent of it, for NSA’s 33,000 employees are also positioned in massive outposts in Colorado, Georgia, Hawaii (where Snowden was based), Texas, and Utah, as well as in an untold number of listening posts around the globe. With an unprecedented, almost unimaginable array of snoop-visibility gadjetry, this matrix of databases draws in, analyzes, and stores some five billion records a day just from cell phones, plus your, my, and the world’s landlines, computers, credit cards, fiber optic cables, satellites, banks, internet servers, and—coming soon—our cameras, smart homes, and wearable electronic gear. Time magazine reports that the absorption of our private information is so vast that the agency’s new classified data-processing center in the Utah desert will require up to 1.7 million gallons of water a day just to keep its computer servers cool.

Traitor!

The Establishment rushed en masse in an enraged, bug-eyed, foam-at-the-mouth, demagogic attack on the truthteller who both exposed and embarrassed them. “Kill the messenger” has not been simply a figure of speech when directed at Snowden, but a denouement devoutly desired by blustering defenders of mass intrusion.

John Bolton, the chickenhawk promoter of the Bush-Cheney WMD debacle in Iraq, squawked on Fox News in December that “Snowden committed treason, he ought to be convicted of that, and then he ought to swing from a tall oak tree.” Earlier, former-NSA honcho Michael Hayden quasi-jokingly told a conference of cyber-security enthusiasts that the “traitor” Snowden should be put on the government’s kill list, prompting Rep. Mike Rogers, the dunderheaded chair of the House intelligence committee, to join the merriment by responding: “I can help you with that.”

The traitor tag apparently was designated to be Talking Point Number One in the orchestrated PR campaign to demonize the young spiller of NSA beans, for it has been a constant refrain in the attacks on him. Even the odious Dick Cheney—who openly betrayed America’s democratic values and processes when he sought to establish his vice presidency as a secret, lawless, autocratic fiefdom—snarled the “T” word at Snowden, adding wildly (and one-hundred percent wrongly) that the disgraced analyst was a spy for China’s communist government.

From the Democratic side, Secretary of State John Kerry also piled on Snowden with the “traitor” charge, as did Sen. Dianne Feinstein, chair of the intelligence committee. In this key post, she is entrusted with the solemn and sworn duty to keep a tight, congressional rein on NSAs empire builders, but Feinstein has proven to be clueless, feckless, and obsequious—a senatorial trifecta! “He violated the oath. He violated the law. It’s treason,” babbled the senator in June, while conceding that she knew nothing about the agency’s wholesale invasion of the people’s constitutional rights until the guy she calls a “traitor” revealed it to her.

Even more pathetic and damning was the rush by a mob of so-called “journalists” to tar and feather Snowden, joining NSA apologists to declare that he’s a bratty malcontent and the real villain of the story. After all, they charge, he abused his position of trust by exposing—O, the irony—the government’s villainy. Roger Simon of Politico, for example, showed the depth of his reportorial gravitas by gratuitously (and erroneously) dismissing the dissident as a low-level functionary with all the qualifications of a “grocery bagger.” David Brooks of The New York Times chimed in with a pompous pile of psycho-babble about “young men in their 20s,” finally diagnosing Snowden as an anti-social misfit who “self-indulgently short-circuited the democratic structures of accountability.” And Richard Cohen, who passes as a liberal commentator at the Washington Post, offered this intellectual insight: “I think he’ll go down as a cross-dressing Little Red Riding Hood.”

For a full-blown journalistic implosion, however, no one has topped the snit that Washington Post opinionator Ruth Marcus had last New Year’s Eve. “The insufferable whistleblower,” she titled her piece, then added “smug, self-righteous, egotistical, disingenuous, megalomaniacal, [and] overwrought” to her overwrought name-calling.

Snowden had “a duty of secrecy,” she snapped—as though no other ethical duty could possibly trump that authoritarian code. Marcus then bemoaned his “massive theft,” which was massive only because NSA is continuously purloining billions of bits of our lives every day, a detail she dismissed by opining that the spy agency’s intrusion “is not nearly as menacing as he sees it.” How does she know that? Apparently, because her NSA sources said as much. Finally, she nailed her critique by sneering that whistleblowers as a group are “difficult” people because “they don’t fit in,” and that Snowden in particular “has an unpleasant personality.”
properties. In that case, God bless America… and government and the skeptical inquiries of the Fourth barks. We’re told that the checks and balances of dogs, sounding off at threats with at least a few because they’re supposed to be democracy’s watch-defenders of democracy have largely abandoned ers. It’s a backdoor way for authorities to shut down secrets are felonious co-conspirators with the leak-theory that those who report on leaks of government which have relentlessly pushed a repressive legal dummy for the Bush and Obama regimes, both of flummoxed Gregory was serving as a ventriloquist’s iteration why Gregory, who calls himself a journalist, Greenwald, be charged with a crime?” he asked in you have aided and abetted Snowden, “he retorted to Gregory, “If you want to embrace that theory, it means that every investigative journalist in the United States who works with their sources, who receives classified information, is a criminal.”

Digging out and reporting inconvenient secret truths about what the government and its corporate contractors are doing is not a crime—it is, in fact, what real journalists are supposed to do. It’s important to remind ourselves (and, apparently, to remind highly paid television personalities like Gregory) that the Bill of Rights was enacted for a reason, namely that the colonists had many harsh experiences with the heavy hand of authoritarian government. For example, the Fourth Amendment’s ban on unreasonable searches and seizures is not just a rhetorical flourish by James Madison, but a direct response to the British aristocracy’s common use of “writs of assistance” against the colonists. These were essentially unlimited search warrants, allowing agents to barge into homes, businesses, whole villages, and anywhere else they chose to rifle through everyone’s possessions and papers without stating what was being sought or why, even if none of the people ransacked was suspected of a crime.

Such tyrannical use of the law taught the framers
of our nation’s founding documents that liberty could not be trusted to the good will of the authorities, even in the new republic they were creating. Thus, they explicitly set forth our basic freedoms in the Bill of Rights as enforceable guarantees in the supreme law of the land.

But will those guarantees be enforced in the new legal and technological paradigm being put forth by NSA and its political sponsors? We now learn that the bullies no longer need red-coated agents to barge their way into our privacy, for they have created electronic writs of assistance that let them do so surreptitiously. And, as Snowden said, the most outrageous part is that they’ve done this “without a majority of society even being aware it was possible.” Pumped full of hubris, these techno-aristocrats are taking America back to a pre-constitutional era. This is not an issue of mere technological progress or even of improved security, but a fundamental alteration of our rights, a changing of what it is to be American.

This is why we must have a gutsy, aggressive, truly free press. We will not have the Fourth Amendment—or any other constitutional right—without a vibrant First. In an article for The Nation last year, free speech champion John Nichols succinctly reiterated why a vigorous and skeptical media is so important: “The freedom of the press protection outlined in the First Amendment is not a privilege provided to reporters — it is a tool established by the founders so that citizens would have access to the information they need to be their own governors.”

That is the profound significance of what Edward Snowden has done for us, for future generations, and for honest, constitutional government in our Land of the Free.

Who is Edward Joseph Snowden?

Ironically, Edward Snowden is the product of the military-intelligence-industrial complex. As profiled by Janet Reitman in an in-depth Rolling Stone article, Snowden was raised in the suburban bubble of Crofton, Maryland, just 15 miles from NSA headquarters. Nearly everyone in town worked at NSA or for defense and intelligence contractors that dotted the area. A quiet boy and dedicated techie, Ed’s real community and education came from internet sites, chat rooms, and games. Though very smart, he dropped out of school in the tenth grade, but worked hard to become “an IT whiz,” as a young co-worker described him in 2007.

An unabashedly patriotic and idealistic young man, he enlisted in the Army in 2004, intending to fight in Iraq as a member of the Special Forces: “I believed in the nobility of our intentions to free oppressed people overseas,” he told Reitman. But he was quickly disillusioned, learning in training that the Army was only taught to kill, “not helping anyone.”

After a serious injury at training camp, the Army discharged him. Soon afterward, Snowden signed on as a CIA computer technician—where he not only burned his expertise in electronics, but learned a lasting lesson. In 2007, working at the agency’s Geneva station, he found a flaw in CIA software and took his concerns to his superiors. They were less than grateful to have their work questioned by a 24-year-old. A manager rewarded Snowden’s integrity by putting a negative note in his personnel file, which killed any chances he had for advancement. In a recent interview, Snowden recounted what this experience taught him: “Trying to work through the system [will] only lead to punishment.”

That is why it’s ridiculously deceitful for President Obama to keep hammering at Snowden with the contention that it was unnecessary for the analyst “to basically dump a mountain of information” into public view, when he could have taken his concerns through channels. Snowden (and plenty of other whistleblowers) know that “channels” is the name of the forbidding swamp where truth and truth tellers are taken to be drowned. Yet, Obama persists in his sham assertion that Snowden would’ve been welcomed in from the cold by the spy hierarchy, because, “I signed an executive order well before Mr. Snowden leaked this information that provided whistleblower protection for the intelligence community for the first time.”

Yes, he did. But he failed to mention that his order specifically exempts employees of government contractors from those protections—and Snowden was a contract employee of NSA, first as a Dell Computer hireling, then as an employee of NSAs nearly $6 billion-a-year mega-contractor, Booz Allen Hamilton. As both Obama and Snowden knew, the president’s order was useless to this whistleblower.

So, who is Edward Joseph Snowden, really? Officially, he’s a thief. He’s charged with stealing government property and communicating classified information without authorization. But a traitor? Even the establishment’s official publication of record, The New York Times, calls him a straightforward whistleblower who “has done his country a great service” and deserves clemency. “When someone reveals that government officials have routinely and deliberately broken the law,” wrote the Times on Jan. 1, “that person should not face life in prison at the hands of that same government.”

And how’s this for a bizarre perversion of justice? Barack Obama now concedes that he was totally ignorant of how far his own appointed spymasters had strayed from their constitutional tethers, and he admits that he would’ve paid no attention to this danger to America’s liberties except for the historic revelations by the 30-year-old guy he insists must be severely punished.

Hysterics aside, Snowden is no radical, certainly no commie, and
no self-serving opportunist. He didn’t sell the evidence he took. He gave it to us, along with a dash of common sense about espionage. “There is a far cry between legitimate law enforcement — where it is targeted, it’s based on reasonable suspicion, individualized suspicion and warranted action — and the sort of dragnet mass surveillance that puts entire populations under a sort of eye and sees everything, even when it’s not needed,” he said late last year from his forced exile in Russia. “This is about a trend in the relationship between the governing and governed in America.”

Let Snowden tell you who he is: “I’m neither a traitor nor a hero. I am an American.”

Rise up, America

In earlier times of intense internal assaults on our sovereignty, the American people themselves have had to rise up to face down the authoritarian power plays of our leaders. This usually involves a lone Snowden type or a small group of people who see gross wrongdoing, are deeply offended by it, and feel a powerful moral obligation to defy the system perpetuating it. It’s not easy to be a whistleblower, but it is important, for the ones who risk all to blow the whistle give the rest of us what we need to respond and rise up.

One of the shallowest assaults on Snowden is the assertion that his leaking of top-secret documents is an unusual and un-American betrayal of trust. What a scream! First, leaks of classified information flood out of Washington practically every day, coming not from whistleblowers, but from top officials themselves who are seeking some political advantage. Obama’s Machiavellian former chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, was dubbed the “leaker-in-chief.” The media have even come up with a standard official phrase to protect these leakers: “A high-ranking source who asked not to be identified because he/she was not authorized to release the information.”

Second, far from being un-American, big disclosures like Snowden’s are deeply offensive to us and contacting subscribers with fake, overpriced renewal offers. Avoid them! An authentic Lowdown renewal notice will always be printed with our logo and ask that payment be made directly to the Lowdown at our subscription office in Langhorne, Pennsylvania. Thanks, and be careful out there!

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J. Edgar Hoover’s dirty tricks campaign against civil rights activists and Vietnam War protestors, the Bush-Cheney WMD scam, and Obama’s secret drone wars.

Too much of the media’s coverage of the NSA story is focused on what should be done with Snowden: Leave him in exile, throw him in prison, or give the Presidential Medal of Freedom to him. All of this is just cocktail party chitchat, trivializing the astounding importance of the whistleblower’s revelations. For having opened our eyes, Snowden should be allowed to come home and be left alone. The question is what we need to do now that we know what Snowden knew?

It’s obvious that the NSA herd intends to hunker down like cattle in a hailstorm, hoping it’ll all blow over soon. Feinstein, Rogers, & Company are taking a hard line, see-no-evil position, giving a blanket endorsement to the agency’s actions and pledging to defeat even meek reforms.

Speaking of meek, Obama tried to deflect action by appointing a high-powered Review Group that he assumed would recommend nothing more than a new coat of paint for the Big Honking Spy Machine. However, the group stunned the White House with a list of reforms that would put some real clamps on NSA’s electronic vacuuming of everyone’s data. One distraught intelligence official told Politico that he was “slobbernockered” by the proposed restrictions. (I don’t know what that means, but I’m pretty sure I’d pay to see it.)

He needn’t have worried, for Obama finally did his straddle dance, issuing a few feel-good reforms, but leaving the sweeping domestic spy operation intact, while entrusting key details to his director of national intelligence, James Clapper. Clapper is an infamous cheerleader for scoop-em-up spying, best known for lying to Congress last year when asked directly if NSA is spying on Americans.

The fight now shifts to the countryside and to a Congress that is undecided on whether to “mend or end” the illicit data grab. One big factor is that this is an election year with all House seats and 33 Senate seats up for grabs. Another factor is that NSA’s assault on our liberties is not a polarized left-versus-right issue: Many conservative-libertarian voters side with most progressives in favor of stopping the needless assault. In short, this is a time when aggressive grassroots action matters.