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Edward Snowden Is No Hero

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Edward Snowden, a twenty-nine-year-old former C.I.A. employee and current government contractor, has leaked news of National Security Agency programs that collect vast amounts of information about the telephone calls made by millions of Americans, as well as e-mails and other files of foreign targets and their American connections. For this, some, including my colleague John Cassidy, are hailing him as a hero and a whistle-blower. He is neither. He is, rather, a grandiose narcissist who

deserves to be in prison.

Snowden provided information to the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian*, which also posted a video interview with him. In it, he describes himself as appalled by the government he served:

The N.S.A. has built an infrastructure that allows it to intercept almost everything. With this capability, the vast majority of human communications are automatically ingested without targeting. If I wanted to see your e-mails or your wife's phone, all I have to do is use intercepts. I can get your e-mails, passwords, phone records, credit cards.

I don't want to live in a society that does these sort of things... I do not want to live in a world where everything I do and say is recorded. That is not something I am willing to support or live under.

What, one wonders, did Snowden think the N.S.A. did? Any marginally attentive citizen, much less N.S.A. employee or contractor, knows that the entire mission of the agency is to intercept electronic communications. Perhaps he thought that the N.S.A. operated only outside the United States; in that case, he hadn't been paying very close attention. In any event, Snowden decided that he does not "want to live in a society" that intercepts private communications. His latter-day conversion is dubious.

And what of his decision to leak the documents? Doing so was, as he more or less acknowledges, a crime. Any government employee or contractor is warned repeatedly that the unauthorized disclosure of classified information is a crime. But Snowden, apparently, was answering to a higher calling. "When you see everything you realize that some of these things are abusive," he said. "The awareness of wrongdoing builds up. There was not one morning when I woke up. It was a natural process." These were legally authorized programs; in the case of Verizon Business's phone records, Snowden certainly knew this, because he leaked the very court order that approved the continuation of the project. So he wasn't blowing the whistle on anything illegal; he was exposing something that failed to meet his own standards of propriety. The question, of course, is whether the government can function when all of its employees (and contractors) can take it upon themselves to sabotage the programs they don't like. That's what Snowden has done.

What makes leak cases difficult is that some leaking—some interaction between reporters and sources who have access to classified information—is normal, even indispensable, in a society with a free press. It's not easy to draw the line between those kinds of healthy encounters and the wholesale, reckless dumping of classified information by the likes of Snowden or Bradley Manning. Indeed, Snowden was so irresponsible in what he gave the *Guardian* and the *Post* that even these institutions thought some of it should not be disseminated to the public. The *Post* decided to publish only four of the forty-one slides that Snowden provided. Its exercise of judgment suggests the absence of Snowden's.

Snowden fled to Hong Kong when he knew publication of his leaks was imminent. In his interview, he said he went there because "they have a spirited commitment to free speech and the right of political dissent." This may be true, in some limited way, but the overriding fact is that Hong Kong is part of China, which is, as Snowden knows, a stalwart adversary of the United States in intelligence matters. (Evan Osnos has more on that.) Snowden is now at the mercy of the Chinese leaders who run Hong Kong. As a result, all of Snowden's secrets may wind up in the hands of the Chinese government—which has no commitment at all to free speech or the right to political dissent. And that makes Snowden a hero?

The American government, and its democracy, are flawed institutions. But our system offers legal options to disgruntled government employees and contractors. They can take advantage of federal whistle-blower laws; they can bring their complaints to Congress; they can try to protest within the institutions where they work. But Snowden did none of this. Instead, in an act that speaks more to his ego than his conscience, he threw the secrets he knew up in the air—and trusted, somehow, that good would come of it. We all now have to hope that he's right.

Photograph by Paolo Pellegrin/Magnum.

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