

The Washington Post and Edward Snowden

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

The tensions between those engaged in the dangerous and compromising pursuit of whistleblowing, and those who use the fruit of such efforts has been all too coarsely revealed in the Washington Post stance on Edward Snowden.[1]

Oliver Stone's *Snowden* has done a good deal of stirring on its release, suggesting that the pardon powers of the Presidential office should be activated. A recent petition calling for a pardon of the former National Security Agency contractor has already received signatures from Steve Wozniak, Maggie Gyllenhaal and Jack Dorsey.[2]

The ACLU, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch similarly believe that Snowden should be exempted from the vengeful retribution of the US state for his 2013 revelations of uncontained, indiscriminate mass surveillance by the NSA and its British counterpart, GCHQ.

In taking its boggling stance, the *Post's* myopic editorial refuses to deem such interception programs as PRISM threatening to privacy, though it does concede that one all-hoovering metadata program "was a stretch, if not an outright violation, of federal surveillance law, and posed risks to privacy." (Point to note there: it was *The Guardian*, rather than the *Post*, that jumped on that one.)

In rather damnable fashion, the board suggests that these technological nasties were otherwise very much within the remit of the law, blithely ignoring the ACLU suit that yielded a completely different result. A program such as PRISM should otherwise never have been revealed, and the US Republic could have gone on being unmolested.

With some reluctance, the not-so-wise denizens of US democracy went to work on the Hill to conduct the first extensive overview of intelligence practices in four decades. The effort was an imperfect one, but only took place because of Snowden's constructively disruptive influence.

This is all minor feed for the editors. Something they can never forgive Snowden for is how his information revealed "leaked details of basically defensible international operations: cooperation with Scandinavian services against Russia; spying on the wife of an Osama bin Laden associate; and certain cyber operations in China."

This position, one effectively calling for the prosecution of the paper's own source, goes totally against the effusive defence of Snowden, run in the same publication, by media columnist Margaret Sullivan.

The Obama administration's woeful record favouring the prosecution rather than the protection of whistleblowers, argues Sullivan, could be turned "around, not entirely, but in an important way by pardoning the former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden and allowing him to return to the United States from his Russian exile without

facing charges.”[3]

The action by the editors is also problematic on another level. As Glenn Greenwald reminded readers in *The Intercept*, the move was distinctly peculiar coming from a publication owing “its sources duties of protection, and which – by virtue of accepting the source’s materials and then publishing them – implicitly declares that the source’s information to be in the public interest.”[4]

Various blades were already unsheathed as Stone’s film began doing its magic. Last week’s flawed House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence committee report went over trodden, and sodden territory, doing its best to cast muck on Snowden’s efforts.[5] Its bipartisan membership deemed it a “comprehensive review” but could only come up with a mere 36 classified pages of material. We were left with the crudest of summaries.

In the summary, nothing about the *actual* damage to US interests was outlined. Much of this remains fantastic at best, unverifiable and speculative at worst. It fell on the members to focus on the issue of Snowden’s own moral fibre, which somehow compromised his revelations. Snowden, urges the report members, was, and is “a serial exaggerator and fabricator” with “a pattern of intentional lying.”[6]

What, in fact, is revealed in the report is institutionally sanctioned mendacity on the part of the US security establishment, and its political defenders. The distortions of fact range from questioning whether Snowden ever “obtained a high school degree equivalent” (which he did) to the “gross exaggeration” about his “senior advisor” role for the CIA. The proof, being very much in the disclosed pudding, suggests that Snowden was certainly doing more than rudimentary filing. Do desk clerks make history?

These tactics go to the modus operandi of those countering the external disclosure of wrong doing within a sclerotic system of information. The assumption, and one made good by prosecutions, is never that a whistleblower is right, but that he or she is presumptively wrong whatever is revealed. The onus is on guilt in the breach, not innocence in patriotic exposure.

Snowden’s historical role is already well etched. He exposed a corrosive form of somnambulism in action, of an espionage world gone feral to the dictates of technology. It was a system that had the connivance, and in some cases, compliance, of some of the highest political figures in the countries of the Five Eyes Agreement. If treason is to be sought, it will not be falling very far from the tree of governance.

While the debate about Snowden’s pardon will continue to simmer, the verdict for the *Post* is a dire one. As Daniel Denvir noted with sharp relevance, “There is a special place in journalism hell reserved for *The Washington Post* editorial board”.[7]

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Notes

[1] https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/edward-snowden-doesnt-deserve-a-pardon/2016/09/17/ec04d448-7c2e-11e6-ac8e-cf8e0dd91dc7_story.html?utm_term=.95e31082f157

[2] <https://pardonsnowden.org/supporters>

- [3] https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/as-a-source-and-a-patriot-edward--snowden-deserves-a-presidential-pardon/2016/09/19/dcb3e3f6-7e9c-11e6-8d0c--fb6c00c90481_story.html
- [4] <https://theintercept.com/2016/09/18/washpost-makes-history-first-paper-to-call-for--prosecution-of-its-own-source-after-accepting-pulitzer/>
- [5] <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/house-intelligence-committees-terrible-horrible--bad-snowden-report/>
- [6] http://intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hpsci_snowden_review_-_unclass_summary_-_final.pdf
- [7] <http://www.salon.com/2016/09/20/betraying-snowden-theres-a-special-place-in-journalism--hell-for-the-washington-post-editorial-board/>

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