

## Why MSNBC Defends NSA Surveillance

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*President Obama seems more willing to alienate his base of young supporters who object to the growing Surveillance State than to offend the national security apparatchiks who run it. But Obama's crackdown on leakers also has found apologists among MSNBC's "liberal" talkers.*

I was a young person when I first heard the quip: "How do you know when the President is lying? His lips are moving." At the time, President Richard Nixon was expanding the war in Vietnam to other countries and deploying the White House "plumbers" to commit crimes against antiwar leakers.

Forty years have passed. Sadly, these days, often when I see President Barack Obama moving his lips, I assume he's lying. Like Nixon, our current president is prolonging an endless, borderless and counter-productive war ("on terror") and waging a parallel war against "national security" leakers that makes the plumbers' burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office look almost quaint.



*Photo: Radio and TV host Ed Schultz.*

The World War I vintage Espionage Act, originally used to imprison socialists for making antiwar speeches, has been used by the administration against whistleblowers with a vengeance unprecedented in history: [eight leakers have been charged](#) with Espionage under Obama, compared to three under all previous presidents.

The Obama administration has prosecuted not a single CIA torturer, but has imprisoned a CIA officer who [talked about torture with a journalist](#). National Security Agency official Thomas Drake, who was unable to get abuses fixed internally, now has a criminal record for [communicating with a reporter](#) years ago about sweeping domestic surveillance.

So there I was watching Obama's lips move about NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden at a June 27 [press conference](#). Saying he wouldn't be "scrambling military jets to go after a 29-year-old hacker," Obama added that he would not "start wheeling and dealing and trading on a whole host of other issues, simply to get a guy extradited." I didn't believe a word of it.

Given Obama's war on whistleblowers and [journalists who utilize them](#), and given the Army's abusive treatment of military whistleblower Bradley Manning (apparently aimed at getting him to implicate WikiLeaks), it's inconceivable that Obama was truly blasé about Snowden. To deter future whistleblowers, Snowden would have to be caught and made an example of - and probably mistreated (like Manning, in hopes of getting him to turn against WikiLeaks and even journalist Glenn Greenwald).

As his lips were moving, Obama knew well that he would go to extreme lengths to prevent this articulate young man from securing asylum in some Latin American country, where he could continue to inform the world's media about the Surveillance State that has blossomed alongside the Warfare State under the Bush and Obama administrations.

That Obama wasn't truthful became clear when the U.S. campaign of "wheeling and dealing" led to possible asylum countries retreating in fear one after another (Vice President Biden was deployed to pressure Ecuador's president by phone). And even clearer with last week's outrageous, [international law-breaking](#) that effectively forced down the presidential plane of Bolivian President Evo Morales.

And if Obama eventually does scramble jets to force down a plane with Snowden on board, the commander-in-chief will be applauded for taking bold and decisive action by mainstream TV talking heads, "national security" experts and the opposition he seems most intent on pleasing: conservatives. Criticism from civil libertarian and peace voices (or unions and environmentalists, for that matter) has rarely daunted Obama.

The bipartisan consensus in support of our bloated Military/Surveillance State - which so [undermines our society as a whole](#) - is reflected in Congress and both the Bush and Obama administrations, as well as mainstream media.

When it comes to issues of U.S. militarism and spying, the allegedly "progressive" MSNBC often seems closer to the "official network of the Obama White House" than anything resembling an independent channel. With a few exceptions (especially [Chris Hayes](#)), MSNBC has usually reacted to expanded militarism and surveillance by downplaying the abuses or defending them.

Had John McCain or Mitt Romney defeated Obama and implemented the exact same policies, treating whistleblowers like Manning and Snowden as foreign espionage agents, one would expect MSNBC hosts to be loudly denouncing the Republican abuses of authority.

But with Obama in power, a number of MSNBC talking heads have reacted to the Snowden disclosures like Fox News hosts did when they were in hysterical damage control mode for Bush - complete with ridiculously fact-free claims and [national chauvinism](#) that we've long come to expect from the "fair & balanced" channel.

As Snowden arrived in Russia from Hong Kong, MSNBC host [Ed Schultz blustered on](#) about Snowden as a "punk" and "coward." Railing about the "security of the country" in tones Sean Hannity would approve of, Schultz questioned Snowden's patriotism and credibility, asking: "If the United States of America is doing something so egregiously wrong in its surveillance program, how come he's the only one speaking up?"

In Bill O'Reilly-like blissful ignorance, Schultz seemed unaware of the three NSA whistleblowers who'd loudly spoken up way earlier than Snowden - and gathered for an illuminating [USA Today interview](#) a week before his tirade.

I watched [one MSNBC host](#) function as an auxiliary prosecutor in Obama's Justice Department, going after Snowden - while trying to link WikiLeaks and journalist Glenn Greenwald to criminal flight.

MSNBC's Melissa Harris-Perry has been [condemning Snowden](#) by contrasting him with civil

disobedients who “love their country” and submit to arrest – while Snowden just wants to [“save his own skin.”](#) She proclaimed: “This is different. This is dangerous to our nation.”

Should we similarly dismiss Dan Ellsberg, who leaked the top secret Pentagon Papers to a dozen newspapers in 1971 by going on the lam from the FBI. Or Watergate’s “Deep Throat,” who saved his own skin by hiding his identity for 30 years after leaking secrets that helped crash the Nixon presidency? [See, for instance, Ellsberg’s op-ed in The Washington Post, [“Snowden Made the Right Call When He Fled the US”](#)]

In a [bizarre monologue](#) attacking Snowden (who’s risked plenty, in my view), Harris-Perry hailed those who engage in civil disobedience for being willing “to risk your own freedom, your own body in order to bring attention to something that needs to be known. Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested, attacked, smeared. **Nelson Mandela went to prison for 27 years.**” (My emphasis.)

Nelson Mandela? He wasn’t a civil disobedient who gave himself up. He was a fugitive, fleeing the apartheid police. He was on the lam domestically, like Snowden is now internationally. And some reports indicate that South African authorities were able to nab Mandela [thanks to the U.S. CIA](#) (one of the agencies now working to apprehend Snowden).

MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow has also disappointed. After doing a typically thorough presentation on the force-down of President’s Morales’s plane, she [ended her report](#) by expressing displeasure only that Washington had apparently gotten allies to go out on the limb “for nothing.” Her objection to the harassment seemed to be: it hadn’t succeeded. I didn’t hear opposition to the action had Snowden actually been on board and apprehended.

The Snowden/NSA story [proves once again](#) that – especially on so-called “national security” issues – we need strong, independent media not enmeshed with the corporate/political power structure and not allied with one of the two corporate parties.

We can’t count on MSNBC to heed the lesson taught by legendary independent journalist I.F. “Izzy” Stone, after [years reporting from Washington](#): “All governments lie and nothing they say should be believed.”

*[Jeff Cohen](#) was an MSNBC pundit and senior producer in 2002-3 until being [terminated](#) for political reasons, along with Phil Donahue, on the eve of the Iraq invasion. He is director of the Park Center for Independent Media at Ithaca College, founder of the media watch group [FAIR](#), and author of [Cable News Confidential: My Misadventures in Corporate Media](#). He cofounded the online action group [RootsAction.org](#), which has petitioned for Snowden.*

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