

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://original.antiwar.com/engelhardt/2014/10/19/edward-snowden-and-the-golden-age-of-spying/print/>

Edward Snowden and the Golden Age of Spying

By Tom Engelhardt

On October 19, 2014 @ 11:00 pm In Uncategorized | No Comments

Here's a Ripley's Believe It or Not! stat from our new age of national security. How many Americans have security clearances? The answer: 5.1 million, a figure that reflects the explosive growth of the national security state in the post-9/11 era. Imagine the kind of system needed just to vet that many people for access to our secret world (to the tune of billions of dollars). We're talking here about the total population of Norway and significantly more people than you can find in Costa Rica, Ireland, or New Zealand. And yet it's only about 1.6% of the American population, while on ever more matters, the unvetted 98.4% of us are meant to be left in the dark.

For our own safety, of course. That goes without saying.

All of this offers a new definition of democracy in which we, the people, are to know only what the national security state cares to tell us. Under this system, ignorance is the necessary, legally enforced prerequisite for feeling protected. In this sense, it is telling that the only crime for which those inside the national security state can be held accountable in post-9/11 Washington is not potential perjury before Congress, or the destruction of evidence of a crime, or torture, or kidnapping, or assassination, or the deaths of prisoners in an extralegal prison system, but whistleblowing; that is, telling the American people something about what their government is actually doing. And that crime, and only that crime, has been prosecuted to the full extent of the law (and beyond) with a vigor unmatched in American history. To offer a single example, the

only American to go to jail for the CIA's Bush-era torture program was John Kiriakou, a CIA whistleblower who revealed the name of an agent involved in the program to a reporter.

In these years, as power drained from Congress, an increasingly imperial White House has launched various wars (redefined by its lawyers as anything but), as well as a global assassination campaign in which the White House has its own "kill list" and the president himself decides on global hits. Then, without regard for national sovereignty or the fact that someone is an American citizen (and upon the secret invocation of legal mumbo-jumbo), the drones are sent off to do the necessary killing.

And yet that doesn't mean that we, the people, know nothing. Against increasing odds, there has been some fine reporting in the mainstream media by the likes of James Risen and Barton Gellman on the security state's post-legal activities and above all, despite the Obama administration's regular use of the World War I era Espionage Act, whistleblowers have stepped forward from within the government to offer us sometimes staggering amounts of information about the system that has been set up in our name but without our knowledge.

Among them, one young man, whose name is now known worldwide, stands out. In June of last year, thanks to journalist Glenn Greenwald and filmmaker Laura Poitras, Edward Snowden, a contractor for the NSA and previously the CIA, stepped into our lives from a hotel room in Hong Kong. With a treasure trove of documents that are still being released, he changed the way just about all of us view our world. He has been charged under the Espionage Act. If indeed he was a "spy," then the spying he did was for us, for the American people and for the world. What he revealed to a stunned planet was a global surveillance state whose reach and ambitions were unique, a system based on a single premise: that privacy was no more and that no one was, in theory (and to a remarkable extent in practice), un surveillable.

Its builders imagined only one exemption: themselves. This was undoubtedly at least part of the reason why, when Snowden let us peek in on them, they reacted with such over-the-top venom. Whatever they felt at a policy level, it's clear that they also felt violated, something that, as far as we can tell, left them with no empathy whatsoever for the rest of us. One thing that Snowden proved, however, was that the system they built was ready-made for blowback.

Sixteen months after his NSA documents began to be released by the *Guardian* and the *Washington Post*, I think it may be possible to speak of the Snowden Era. And now, a remarkable new film, *Citizenfour*, which had its premiere at the New York Film Festival on October 10th and will open in select theaters nationwide on October 24th, offers us a window into just how it all happened. It is already being mentioned as a possible Oscar winner.

Director Laura Poitras, like reporter Glenn Greenwald, is now known almost as widely as Snowden himself, for helping facilitate his entry into the world. Her new film, the last in a trilogy she's completed (the previous two being *My Country, My Country* on the Iraq War and *The Oath* on Guantanamo), takes you back to June 2013 and locks you in that Hong Kong hotel room with Snowden, Greenwald, Ewen MacAskill of the *Guardian*, and Poitras herself for eight days that changed the world. It's a riveting, surprisingly unclaustrophobic, and unforgettable experience.

Before that moment, we were quite literally in the dark. After it, we have a better sense, at least, of the nature of the darkness that envelops us. Having seen her film in a packed house at the New York Film Festival, I sat down with Poitras in a tiny conference room at the Loews Regency Hotel in New York City to discuss just how our world has changed and her part in it.

Tom Engelhardt: Could you start by laying out briefly what you think we've learned from Edward Snowden about how our world really works?

Laura Poitras: The most striking thing Snowden has revealed is the depth of what the NSA and the Five Eyes countries [Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Great Britain, and the U.S.] are doing, their hunger for all data, for total bulk dragnet surveillance where they try to collect all communications and do it all sorts of different ways. Their ethos is "collect it all." I worked on a story with Jim Risen of the *New York Times* about a document – a four-year plan for signals intelligence – in which they describe the era as being "the golden age of signals intelligence." For them, that's what the Internet is: the basis for a golden age to spy on everyone.

This focus on bulk, dragnet, suspicionless surveillance of the planet is certainly what's most staggering. There were many programs that did that. In addition, you have both the NSA and the GCHQ [British intelligence] doing things like targeting engineers at telecoms. There was an article published at *The Intercept* that cited an NSA document Snowden provided, part of which was titled "I Hunt Sysadmins" [systems administrators]. They try to find the custodians of information, the people who are the gateway to customer data, and target them. So there's this passive collection of everything, and then things that they can't get that way, they go after in other ways.

I think one of the most shocking things is how little our elected officials knew about what the NSA was doing. Congress is learning from the reporting and that's staggering. Snowden and [former NSA employee] William Binney, who's also in the film as a whistleblower from a different generation, are technical people who understand the dangers. We laypeople may have some understanding of these technologies, but they really grasp the dangers of how they can be used. One of the most frightening things, I think, is the capacity for retroactive searching, so you can go back in time and trace who someone is in contact with and where they've been. Certainly, when it comes to my profession as a journalist, that allows the government to trace what you're reporting, who you're talking to, and where you've been. So no matter whether or not I have a commitment to protect my sources, the government may still have information that might allow them to identify whom I'm talking to.

TE: To ask the same question another way, what would the world be like without Edward Snowden? After all, it seems to me that, in some sense, we are now in the Snowden era.

LP: I agree that Snowden has presented us with choices on how we want to move forward into the future. We're at a crossroads and we still don't quite know which path we're going to take. Without Snowden, just about everyone would still be in the dark about the amount of information the government is collecting. I think that Snowden has changed consciousness about the dangers of surveillance. We see lawyers who take their phones out of meetings now. People are starting to understand that the devices we carry with us reveal our location, who we're

talking to, and all kinds of other information. So you have a genuine shift of consciousness post the Snowden revelations.

TE: There's clearly been no evidence of a shift in governmental consciousness, though.

LP: Those who are experts in the fields of surveillance, privacy, and technology say that there need to be two tracks: a policy track and a technology track. The technology track is encryption. It works and if you want privacy, then you should use it. We've already seen shifts happening in some of the big companies – Google, Apple – that now understand how vulnerable their customer data is, and that if it's vulnerable, then their business is, too, and so you see a beefing up of encryption technologies. At the same time, no programs have been dismantled at the governmental level, despite international pressure.

TE: In *Citizenfour*, we spend what must be an hour essentially locked in a room in a Hong Kong hotel with Snowden, Glenn Greenwald, Ewan MacAskill, and you, and it's riveting. Snowden is almost preternaturally prepossessing and self-possessed. I think of a novelist whose dream character just walks into his or her head. It must have been like that with you and Snowden. But what if he'd been a graying guy with the same documents and far less intelligent things to say about them? In other words, how exactly did who he was make your movie and remake our world?

LP: Those are two questions. One is: What was my initial experience? The other: How do I think it impacted the movie? We've been editing it and showing it to small groups, and I had no doubt that he's articulate and genuine on screen. But to see him in a full room [at the New York Film Festival premiere on the night of October 10th], I'm like, wow! He really commands the screen! And I experienced the film in a new way with a packed house.

TE: But how did you experience him the first time yourself? I mean you didn't know who you were going to meet, right?

LP: So I was in correspondence with an anonymous source for about five months and in the process of developing a dialogue you build ideas, of course, about who that person might be. My idea was that he was in his late forties, early fifties. I figured he must be Internet generation because he was super tech-savvy, but I thought that, given the level of access and information he was able to discuss, he had to be older. And so my first experience was that I had to do a reboot of my expectations. Like fantastic, great, he's young and charismatic and I was like wow, this is so disorienting, I have to reboot. In retrospect, I can see that it's really powerful that somebody so smart, so young, and with so much to lose risked so much.

He was so at peace with the choice he had made and knowing that the consequences could mean the end of his life and that this was still the right decision. He believed in it, and whatever the consequences, he was willing to accept them. To meet somebody who has made those kinds of decisions is extraordinary. And to be able to document that and also how Glenn [Greenwald] stepped in and pushed for this reporting to happen in an aggressive way changed the narrative. Because Glenn and I come at it from an outsider's perspective, the narrative unfolded in a way

that nobody quite knew how to respond to. That's why I think the government was initially on its heels. You know, it's not everyday that a whistleblower is actually willing to be identified.

TE: My guess is that Snowden has given us the feeling that we now grasp the nature of the global surveillance state that is watching us, but I always think to myself, well, he was just one guy coming out of one of 17 interlocked intelligence outfits. Given the remarkable way your film ends – the punch line, you might say – with another source or sources coming forward from somewhere inside that world to reveal, among other things, information about the enormous watchlist that you yourself are on, I'm curious: What do you think is still to be known? I suspect that if whistleblowers were to emerge from the top five or six agencies, the CIA, the DIA, the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency, and so on, with similar documentation to Snowden's, we would simply be staggered by the system that's been created in our name.

LP: I can't speculate on what we don't know, but I think you're right in terms of the scale and scope of things and the need for that information to be made public. I mean, just consider the CIA and its effort to suppress the Senate's review of its torture program. Take in the fact that we live in a country that a) legalized torture and b) where no one was ever held to account for it, and now the government's internal look at what happened is being suppressed by the CIA. That's a frightening landscape to be in.

In terms of sources coming forward, I really reject this idea of talking about one, two, three sources. There are many sources that have informed the reporting we've done and I think that Americans owe them a debt of gratitude for taking the risk they do. From a personal perspective, because I'm on a watchlist and went through years of trying to find out why, of having the government refuse to confirm or deny the very existence of such a list, it's so meaningful to have its existence brought into the open so that the public knows there is a watchlist, and so that the courts can now address the legality of it. I mean, the person who revealed this has done a huge public service and I'm personally thankful.

TE: You're referring to the unknown leaker who's mentioned visually and elliptically at the end of your movie and who revealed that the major watchlist your on has more than 1.2 million names on it. In that context, what's it like to travel as Laura Poitras today? How do you embody the new national security state?

LP: In 2012, I was ready to edit and I chose to leave the U.S. because I didn't feel I could protect my source footage when I crossed the U.S. border. The decision was based on six years of being stopped and questioned every time I returned to the United States. And I just did the math and realized that the risks were too high to edit in the U.S., so I started working in Berlin in 2012. And then, in January 2013, I got the first email from Snowden.

TE: So you were protecting...

LP: ...other footage. I had been filming with NSA whistleblower William Binney, with Julian Assange, with Jacob Appelbaum of the Tor Project, people who have also been targeted by the U.S., and I felt that this material I had was not safe. I was put on a watchlist in 2006. I was detained and questioned at the border returning to the U.S. probably around 40 times. If I

counted domestic stops and every time I was stopped at European transit points, you're probably getting closer to 80 to 100 times. It became a regular thing, being asked where I'd been and who I'd met with. I found myself caught up in a system you can't ever seem to get out of, this Kafkaesque watchlist that the U.S. doesn't even acknowledge.

TE: Were you stopped this time coming in?

LP: I was not. The detentions stopped in 2012 after a pretty extraordinary incident.

I was coming back in through Newark Airport and I was stopped. I took out my notebook because I always take notes on what time I'm stopped and who the agents are and stuff like that. This time, they threatened to handcuff me for taking notes. They said, "Put the pen down!" They claimed my pen could be a weapon and hurt someone.

"Put the pen down! The pen is dangerous!" And I'm like, you're not... you've got to be crazy. Several people yelled at me every time I moved my pen down to take notes as if it were a knife. After that, I decided this has gotten crazy, I'd better do something and I called Glenn. He wrote a piece about my experiences. In response to his article, they actually backed off.

TE: Snowden has told us a lot about the global surveillance structure that's been built. We know a lot less about what they are doing with all this information. I'm struck at how poorly they've been able to use such information in, for example, their war on terror. I mean, they always seem to be a step behind in the Middle East – not just behind events but behind what I think someone using purely open source information could tell them. This I find startling. What sense do you have of what they're doing with the reams, the yottabytes, of data they're pulling in?

LP: Snowden and many other people, including Bill Binney, have said that this mentality – of trying to suck up everything they can – has left them drowning in information and so they miss what would be considered more obvious leads. In the end, the system they've created doesn't lead to what they describe as their goal, which is security, because they have too much information to process.

I don't quite know how to fully understand it. I think about this a lot because I made a film about the Iraq War and one about Guantanamo. From my perspective, in response to the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. took a small, very radical group of terrorists and engaged in activities that have created two generations of anti-American sentiment motivated by things like Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. Instead of figuring out a way to respond to a small group of people, we've created generations of people who are really angry and hate us. And then I think, if the goal is security, how do these two things align, because there are more people who hate the United States right now, more people intent on doing us harm? So either the goal that they proclaim is not the goal or they're just unable to come to terms with the fact that we've made huge mistakes in how we've responded.

TE: I'm struck by the fact that failure has, in its own way, been a launching pad for success. I mean, the building of an unparalleled intelligence apparatus and the greatest explosion of intelligence gathering in history came out of the 9/11 failure. Nobody was held accountable,

nobody was punished, nobody was demoted or anything, and every similar failure, including the one on the White House lawn recently, simply leads to the bolstering of the system.

LP: So how do you understand that?

TE: I don't think that these are people who are thinking: we need to fail to succeed. I'm not conspiratorial in that way, but I do think that, strangely, failure has built the system and I find that odd. More than that I don't know.

LP: I don't disagree. The fact that the CIA knew that two of the 9/11 hijackers were entering the United States and didn't notify the FBI and that nobody lost their job is shocking. Instead, we occupied Iraq, which had nothing to do with 9/11. I mean, how did those choices get made?