



7-6-2020

Book Review of "Permanent Record" by Edward Snowden

Jyotirmoy Banerjee
Jadavpur University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/ijns>

Recommended Citation

Banerjee, Jyotirmoy (2020) "Book Review of "Permanent Record" by Edward Snowden," *International Journal of Nuclear Security*. Vol. 6: No. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/ijns/vol6/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Nuclear Security by an authorized editor of Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact trace@utk.edu.

Book Review

Permanent Record

Snowden, Edward

Metropolitan Books, Macmillan, London, 2019, 352 pages, ISBN-10: 1250237238, ISBN-13: 978-1250237231, Price: \$14.99 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Jyotirmoy Banerjee, Professor of International Relations (retd.) Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India

He hacked clocks at age 6.

Sleeping through his school lectures and facing a broken home, this computer prodigy first joined the US army's Special Forces. An accident while training broke his legs. The incident marked a *volte face* in Edward Snowden's career.

Snowden got his first top secret clearance from the spooky National Security Agency (NSA, aka 'no such agency') at 22, then rolled over in 2007 to the CIA's 'vault' (office) in the US embassy in Geneva. A Dell contractee, he re-joined the NSA in 2009 and served in the latter's technical center at Yokota air base near Tokyo till 2011. There he helped build a backup of massive data stored at the NSA's headquarters in Fort Meade, Maryland.

Subsequently he returned to the US, received a "stratospheric" promotion and was deployed again to the CIA. This time he helped shape the 'cloud,' a new computing architecture that enabled agents to access any data from anywhere.

In 2012 the NSA deployed the Dell contractee to its Kunia signals intelligence (SIGINT) center in Oahu, Hawaii. Nicknamed the Tunnel, this was an underground World War II-era aircraft factory tucked away under a pineapple field (in 2012 the Hawaii Cryptological Center in Wahiawa supplemented it). Snowden spent 15 months in the 'paradise'--the last three as contractee with consulting firm [Booz Allen Hamilton](#)—partly to relax Hawaiian style as an antidote to his epileptic seizures and insomnia. Though Kunia focused on the electronic monitoring of China and North Korea, Snowden's mind was already churning elsewhere since Yokota.

His seven years as systems analyst with the US intelligence community (IC, with 17 entities) opened his eyes, in his view, to questionable NSA activity. In May 2013 he left the US—with smuggled out mini- and micro SD cards holding an enormous amount of NSA secrets. He handed these over to journalist Glenn Greenwald of *The Guardian* and documentary film maker [Laura Poitras](#) in Hong Kong's Mira hotel (after refrigerating the visitors' cellphones). From June *The Guardian* and other newspapers shocked the world by publishing his revelations. On 9 June Snowden revealed himself to the public. Independent-minded Hong Kong authorities could not honor a US demand to arrest him purportedly because the US got his middle name wrong, putting 'James' instead of 'Joseph' (*The Guardian*, June 26, 2013). In hiding, Snowden desperately sought asylum in 27 countries--in vain, then finally left for Moscow on 23 June and settled down there.

But what motivated him to wreck a lucrative career (annual salary estimates vary from \$122,000 to \$200,000) and a comfortable life with his girlfriend in Hawaiian paradise?

Snowden admits he did not have the formal academic qualifications to even enter the CIA or NSA buildings. Nevertheless, his career had fast-tracked to the top. This was because their failure to anticipate the 9/11 calamity came as a shock to the IC. The latter grabbed any technical talent to prevent future Pearl Harbors. And they discovered that talent in the Rubik's Cube-toting computer

wizard. Snowden describes the delight of hacking just for the heck of it. Why do people climb Mt. Everest? “Because it is there”! (p.56).

So, what made him act the way he did? His conscience, he says.

This was not entirely new. In October 2001 William Binney and J. Kirk Wiebe, with over 36 years of NSA work, retired. They were unable to stay at the NSA any longer “in good conscience.” In their opinion, the NSA was splurging on Trailblazer rather than Binney’s purportedly more efficient and selective Thin Thread programme. Trailblazer sucked in all the electronic information, thereby ‘smothering’ NSA analysts. This, Binney believed, led to the failure of 9/11. The concerns of the duo, conveyed through internal channels to the Departments of Justice and Defense, hit a *cul-de-sac*. In July 2007 gun-toting FBI agents confronted Binney while he was in the shower. This presumably was the reason why Snowden skipped approaching the so-called ‘proper channels’ to air his concerns.

Edward Snowden tossed the NSA’s deepest secrets into the public domain. A number of mass surveillance programmes came to the limelight. XKeyscore, Echelon, Prism, Trailblazer and Stellar Wind were programmes meant to snoop into the privacy of individuals. Stellar Wind, spawned following 9/11, sprang the limits of authorized data mining. The NSA’s defense is that it collects only ‘meta data’— i.e. data on time and location of communications (phone calls, emails, SMS, etc.)-- and not their content. But even meta data over time will create an individual’s personality profile, allege both Snowden and Binney.

Snowden argues that the nature of the internet has changed beyond recognition. From a benign domain of universal knowledge-sharing, it has metamorphosed into an ad-based business model. Giant corporates, mostly America-based, snoop on the individual’s preferences and tastes. This leads to mass surveillance, collection and storage of personal information. These corporates have discovered, says Snowden, that people are keen on cultivating contacts and relationships. Hence the proliferation of social-networking platforms designed to monetize them. In 2014 the turnover of internet ads was \$ 137 billion, according to Andy Yen of the Swiss-based Proton Mail.

Further, says Snowden, the NSA in turn has had information-sharing arrangements like Prism with tech giants. This is called ‘downstream’ programme. An ‘upstream’ programme, on the other hand, appears when the NSA itself snoops directly. The US government, according to one estimate, spends over \$ 90 billion for ‘cloud’ architecture. Indeed, the NSA’s sprawling \$1.5 billion Bluffdale, Utah facility (aka Bumblehive) is expected to house a mind-boggling yottabyte (10^{24}) of massive data repository. Snowden would call it ‘permanent record’.

In its worldwide assault on privacy, asserts the whistleblower, the US leads since much of the internet traffic starts, ends or transits through its territory. The internet giants are mostly American, too.

To sum up the reasons for the internet-turned-Frankenstein, as recounted in Snowden’s *Permanent Record*:

The two triggers for mass surveillance, as already noted, were the post-9/11 paranoia and the rapid progress of digital communication. Besides, maintains Snowden, while many governments today are technology-driven to collect mass personal data, the USA leads the pack because it dominates the internet. The technological ability to gather and store worldwide data stimulates a sense of power. Governments love power, and the USA is no exception. Power over masses gives you control.

In his view this power drive, aided by rapid technological advances, corporate domination and geographical advantage has led the American government to violate individual privacy. The NSA, Snowden observes, has “hacked the constitution.” Commenting on him James Bamford, who authored

Puzzle Palace on the agency, wrote in *Wired* magazine that the NSA was “like a night prowler with a bag of stolen goods suddenly caught in a powerful Klieg light.”(12 June 2013).

The issue of his act crops up frequently in Snowden’s book.

“I don’t want to live in the world where everything ... is tracked and monitored,” he said (*Japan Times*, June 4, 2016). His oath, he insists, was to the constitution and the people of the United States, NOT to its government allegedly betraying its mandate. He sees himself as conscience-stricken who had to do something about it. Transgression of constitutional limits in the name of combating terrorism does not cut ice with him. Instead of reverting to a comfortable existence but with a conscience switched off he chose to do the opposite. Eric Holder, the former US Attorney-General, remarked that while his act was illegal, Snowden rendered commendable public service by triggering a debate over mass surveillanceⁱⁱ.

In consequence of Snowden’s revelations privacy-conscious Switzerland created the encrypted Proton Mail. 'Https' replaced 'http' in internet address for greater security. A worldwide debate started on the question of government intrusion into privacy. The NSA opened an ‘IC Off the Record’ website “in an effort to increase transparency”ⁱⁱⁱ. It hosts the Snowden files.

Permanent Record reflects Snowden’s attempt to come to terms with himself.

Edward Joseph Snowden is today resigned to an indefinite exile in Russia. His video interviews are widely available on the internet. He cannot return home, he says, since he has been charged under the draconian Espionage Act of 1917 that does not allow the accused self-defense.

The absence of an index is the only major drawback in this otherwise sincerely composed apologia.

ⁱ “Bio: William Binney and J. Kirk Wiebe”, <https://whistleblower.org/bio-william-binney-and-j-kirk-wiebe/>. Accessed 27 March 2020, 10.05 am, Indian Standard Time (IST).

ⁱⁱ Matthew Jaffe, "Eric Holder says Edward Snowden performed a 'public service'", <https://www.cnn.com/2016/05/30/politics/axe-files-axelrod-eric-holder/index.html>, May 31, 2016. Accessed 31 March 2020, 8.41 IST.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://nsa.gov/1.info/utah-data-center/>. Accessed 26 March 2020, 08.11 pm, IST.