

Edward Snowden: Justified or Not?

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Edward Snowden is a controversial figure originating from the United States. He is most prominently known for leaking sensitive information which he was able to access and obtain while working for Booz Allen as a National Security Agency (NSA) private contractor. The unauthorized release of classified top-secret information compromised United States national security and by doing so virtually gifted U.S. enemies, both foreign and domestic, an advantage over the United States. Snowden, charged with espionage, believes that there is no harm done by his actions. While many Americans might agree that NSA surveillance programs are intrusive and should be rendered unlawful, Snowden should have chosen alternative actions to share his thoughts and opinions which will not result in legal repercussions and threaten national security.

Edward Snowden, born in 1983, grew up in the United States as a typical American child. According to Ray (2022a), Snowden failed to complete high school and instead, earned his GED then went on to study at a community college during the years 1999-2005, though he never received a college degree. In May 2004, he started his journey as an Army reservist special forces candidate and was discharged just four months later. In 2006, Snowden's computer skills captured the attention of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and he was hired as a network security technician in Geneva and given a top-secret security clearance. In 2009, he left the CIA and began working for the Dell as a private contractor. Moon (2017) states, "Snowden lasted two years before he had to take a routine polygraph and undergo an evaluation at the CIA. He received a derogatory report and ultimately was told to resign quietly or face a punitive investigation. This action did not revoke Snowden's security clearance and he was hired by a private contractor, Dell, in large part because of his clearance" (p.144). Prior to Edward Snowden obtaining a top-secret security clearance, he pledged to refrain from sharing classified

information with anyone who is not cleared to possess knowledge of such information. During Snowden's time with the CIA and NSA, his top-secret security clearance gave him access to thousands of the nation's most classified documents which pose a major national security threat if found in the wrong hands. While working with the NSA, Snowden discovered disturbing details pertaining to secret NSA surveillance programs. According to Davies (2019), Snowden admits that in the later years of his career, he became bothered by the NSA's surveillance programs and believed them to be unconstitutional according to the Fourth Amendment. Snowden states, "An oath of service...is a pledge of allegiance to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic" (Davies, 2019, p.1). Snowden's anger toward the NSA's questionable surveillance programs led to his initial desire to share the classified information: "And this is when I start to think about maybe we need to know about this, maybe if Congress knew about this, maybe if the courts knew about this, we would not have the same policies as the Chinese government" (Davies, 2019, p.1). This ultimately sparked Snowden to download thousands of classified documents from the NSA and disclose those documents to reporters in Hong Kong, China in 2013.

In addition, weeks before Edward Snowden arrived in Hong Kong to deliver classified documents to three journalists, he left his contractor job with Dell and "...taken a pay cut to work for Booz Allen as a contractor so he could be in an NSA facility in Hawaii" (Moon, 2017, p. 145). Once Snowden gained access to the NSA facility in Hawaii, he was able to acquire sixteen passwords, hack accounts, and download millions of classified documents within about five weeks prior to taking medical leave and boarding a plane to Hong Kong, China (Moon, 2017). Once Snowden arrived in Hong Kong, he met with three journalists, one being Laura Portias of the *Guardian*, and shared a couple hundred-thousand secret NSA documents (Moon,

2017). Once the documents had been officially leaked, it became public that Edward Snowden is the man behind the leaks. “After meeting with the journalists, Snowden intended to leave Hong Kong and travel via Russia to Ecuador, where he would seek asylum. But when his plane landed at Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport, things didn't go according to plan” (Davies, 2019, p.1). The U.S. government canceled Snowden’s passport with the intention of him being forced back to the U.S.; however, instead of traveling back to the U.S., he remained at Moscow’s Sheremetyevo International Airport for forty days while negotiating asylum (Davies, 2019). It is reported that during this time, Snowden was assisted by WikiLeaks, which may or may not have played a larger role in Snowden’s crime. Snowden was ultimately denied asylum by twenty-seven nations and eventually granted temporary asylum by Russia which has since been changed to permanent Russian residency (Davies, 2019). Currently, much of Snowden’s whereabouts are unknown; however, it is known that he remains in Russia.

To continue, “WikiLeaks is a media organization and website that functions as a clearinghouse for classified or otherwise privileged information” (Ray, 2022b, p.1). According to Ray (2022b), WikiLeaks is founded by Julian Assange, a distinguished computer hacker who, in 1991, plead guilty to numerous cybercrimes but did not receive significant punishment. Assange founded WikiLeaks for the purpose of creating a more efficient way for whistleblowers to reveal information. WikiLeaks plays an important role in the case of Edward Snowden because “...during his time at Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport, WikiLeaks assisted Snowden with legal representation and public relations operations” (Pincus, 2013, p.1). It is unclear what additional roles Julian Assange and WikiLeaks may have played in guiding/assisting Snowden and his efforts to release thousands of classified documents regarding NSA surveillance programs.

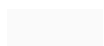
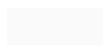
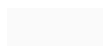
Shortly after Edward Snowden made public that he is responsible for leaking classified NSA documents which resulted in a major threat to U.S. national security, the U.S. government began compiling charges against him. The charges became official “On 14 June 2013... and include espionage, theft of government property, unauthorized communication of national defense information and willful communication of classified intelligence to unauthorized persons” (Abeyratne, 2014, p.18). In addition, Abeyratne further explained “charges of espionage and theft were based on Snowden’s access and downloading of classified documents from NSA servers, which led to the publication of several articles regarding the NSA’s surveillance program” (Abeyratne, 2014, p.18). After Snowden released the classified documents to reporters in Hong Kong, he continued his international travels and eventually became stuck at Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport’s transit lounge on account of the U.S. government cancelling his passport. The U.S. government requested that Snowden be extradited back to the U.S. to address the crimes that have been committed. According to Abeyratne (2014), “Extradition is a process by which one State affects the return of a person required by another State who has committed an offence in the requesting State or who has committed an offence adversely affecting that State, upon request of that State” (Abeyratne, 2014, p.19). However, there was an issue with the extradition process: “The Russian authorities claimed that an airport transit lounge is not subject to the authority of the country in which it lies, because the passengers there are not required to pass through that country's immigration process” (Abeyratne, 2014, p.19). Snowden, unable to leave the airport transit lounge, remained for over a month and negotiated asylum with Russia. Snowden was eventually granted temporary asylum with Russia which led to permanent citizenship. This raises some questions and legal concerns:

why did Russia not agree to extradite Snowden back to the U.S. and why was he eventually granted citizenship?

Finally, it is important to discuss the ethics of Edward Snowden's actions. Snowden claims that his actions benefit everyone; however, the risks of Snowden's actions certainly outweigh the benefits as it pertains to national security. Snowden was not thinking of anyone but himself when he chose to act upon his anger toward the NSA. If one views Snowden's decisions in a Christian perspective, his decisions should have been based upon 1 Corinthians 10:23 "I have the right to do anything," you say – but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything," – but not everything is constructive" (New International Version). Ultimately, Snowden had legal alternatives: discuss his concerns with the inspector general or go to Congress (Giang, 2013). Though Snowden's actions were wrong and criminal, his actions did spark change in information protection within government agencies, such as the NSA. Lyon (2015) notes some changes include filtering of data with insignificant data being deleted, so the NSA is no longer holding onto unnecessary information. Also, in June of 2015 the U.S. Freedom Act passed which restricts telephone data of U.S citizens (Lyon, 2015).

In conclusion, Edward Snowden's decision to collect and leak classified NSA documents is a historic crime in U.S. history. I agree that the NSA secret surveillance programs needed to be regulated; however, I do not agree with Snowden's choice to leak classified documents consequently putting U.S. national security at risk. Snowden, who remains in Russia while escaping prosecution, was not wrong in believing the NSA surveillance programs were unnecessarily invasive and should be brought into the spotlight; however, he should have followed the proper steps to protect information security and keep the programs confidential. I believe that the consequences of Snowden's crimes are still affecting the U.S. today. There are

many groups and countries who wish to harm the U.S. through both cyber and physical warfare; therefore, it is extremely important that all confidential information remain confidential as to not assist in attacks against the U.S.

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