

## **Edward Snowden: The Insider Betrayal and Vulnerable Government**

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the life of Edward Snowden from an early age as he makes his way into the public eye. Snowden is very experienced with computers and widely considered as exceptional in his field of work. He made national attention when he stole classified documents from the National Security Agency's servers while working as a subcontractor in Hawaii. He stole thousands of documents containing all types of information from current surveillance operations to how the United States government was collecting data from its citizens in an agreement with Verizon. The main focus is to understand the implications of Snowden's actions from a legal, ethical, and national security standpoint while displaying a personal opinion on the events that took place.

## **Introduction**

Known as both the largest act of espionage since the Cold War and the greatest triumph for privacy protection from the government, Edward Snowden's leak of classified United States documents sent shockwaves throughout the world. It puts into question the privacy of citizens from their own government with major ethical concerns. Snowden shined a light on the importance of preventing insider betrayal and having exceptional encryption for data protection. It is also extremely concerning from a national security standpoint because Snowden alone was able to infiltrate the National Security Agency (NSA) and practically handed the United States over to other countries on a silver platter.

## **Background on Snowden's life**

Edward Snowden is an American citizen born in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. Snowden's family came from a military background as both his father and grandfather were in the coast guard. In his early years, Snowden did have some troubles within his family, as the Biography states, "Snowden's father... later relocated to Pennsylvania and remarried" ("Edward Snowden," 2014). For any child, this can be devastating and this is no different for Snowden as he watched his father move out and start a new family while he continued to live with his mother. As for Snowden's educational background, he flunked out of high school and "...studied computers at Anne Arundel Community College in Arnold, Maryland" ("Edward Snowden," 2014). When he attempted to join the Army, he was not able to make it through his training and was discharged just after four months. The way Snowden was able to eventually land a job working with the NSA, was actually through a security job he got at the University of Maryland's Center for Advanced Study of Language. This led him to be hired by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In just after two years, he would leave the CIA in 2009 "after being

suspected of trying to break into classified files...” (“Edward Snowden,” 2014). This should have been the government’s first sign that he was up to no good while working with classified information, but he would go on to work as a subcontractor with the NSA. This is the beginning of the whistleblower Snowden would become.

### **WikiLeaks and the Whistleblower**

Though most people would be extremely excited to work with the NSA, Snowden saw things that spun his moral compass. Snowden would be transferred to Hawaii where he was a system administrator tasked with monitoring and maintaining the transfer of data for the NSA as a subcontractor (Esposito & Cole, 2013). It was there where he had access to the NSA’s servers all the way in Maryland. With just the help of some thumb drives and a lack of both security and supervision, Snowden was able to download thousands of sensitive documents without a trail (Esposito & Cole, 2013). While on the run, Snowden in an interview with the Guardian explained, “...I don’t want to live in a world where there’s no privacy and therefore no room for intellectual exploration and creativity” (Greenwald et al., 2013). In the documents leaked by Snowden, there is evidence that the NSA was collecting data from an agreement with Verizon, a wireless company, thus supporting his claim for no privacy. As Snowden would go on to collect numerous documents from the NSA, he still needed a way to get them out to the entire world. This is where WikiLeaks comes in. WikiLeaks is a “...web site that functioned as a clearinghouse for classified or otherwise privileged information” (Ray, 2010). WikiLeaks was known to release classified information well before the Snowden leaks. They leaked lots of information pertaining to the Iraqi war and Hillary Clinton. So, it is not unexpected that Snowden would go on to release numerous documents through WikiLeaks in an effort to reach as many people around the world as possible.

### **Paying the Price for Breaking the Law**

Leaking classified information does not come at a small price and Snowden could be paying it all back for the rest of his life. After convincing journalists from the Guardian to meet him in Hong Kong, Snowden began to hand over classified documents thus dubbing him a traitor. The United States did not take this lightly and subsequently charged him with “conveying classified information to an unauthorized party, disclosing communications intelligence information, and theft of government property” (Gerstein, 2013). It is without a doubt that Snowden committed these crimes, but at what cost? The true purpose of Snowden’s actions was to change the way the United States government surveys its own citizens and to ensure people have the right to privacy. From an ethical standpoint, it is arguable wrong for the government to collect a massive amount of data on its citizens, especially without permission. The collection of phone records, text messages, emails, location, and search history could give the government an entire profile of someone without ever meeting them in person. Something most people would not deem fair. It would not be long before the courts agreed, “a federal appeals court ruled that the NSA's massive collection of Americans' phone records is illegal” (Biz, 2015). This decision by the courts puts into question was Snowden really a traitor or was he just looking out for peoples’ right to privacy? Maybe instead of stealing the documents and leaking them to third parties, Snowden should have followed the proper channels to report his concerns and address them within the United States.

### **We Can Not Let This Happen Again**

Sometimes the biggest threat to a government is not another country but someone within the government itself. Benedict Arnold proved this in early American history and much like today, Snowden has proved the same. His actions raise questions like, could this have been

prevented? The simple answer is yes. An intelligence official stated, “It’s 2013 and the NSA is stuck in 2003 technology” (Esposito & Cole, 2013). This statement shows that the NSA was not up to par with advancements in technology and likely not taking its digital security seriously. Better encryption and supervision are just a couple of ways to ensure it is more difficult to steal information, but if not Edward Snowden then who? Although an organization or government can take precautions and establish some form of security, there is arguably always a way in. The digital world is so vast and interconnected like never before and it continues to grow daily. Rapid advances in technology make it difficult to keep up. The biggest changes for the NSA after the leaks were the “...two-person rule, which requires that two systems administrators approve jointly any access to systems and files containing highly classified materials” and an increase in encryption to protect sensitive material (Chabrow, 2013). Though these steps towards prevention are great, it is more important that the government has learned to take its cyber security more seriously. The world has shifted from physical confrontations to digital confrontations, and it is crucial for the United States not to overlook them.

### **Picking Up the Pieces**

To this day, documents stolen by Snowden are still being released out into the world and there is no doubt that each one threatens the national security of the United States. The enemies of the United States will not hesitate to gain an upper hand and the government has a responsibility to protect its citizens. His actions have proved as both a blessing and a curse. Because of this event, the security within the United States government was strengthened and was to be taken seriously. Though this was at the cost of numerous damaging documents, I believe it was necessary to ensure the protection of privacy and shed light on surveillance tactics to prevent them from getting out of hand. I believe Snowden has already paid the price of leaking

the classified information by being on the run for the past eight years. The government should ensure it maintains a check and balance approach when trying to access people's privacy. For example, anytime there are critical decisions to be made in regard to information gathering or the collection of peoples' data, there should be a board of trusted individuals who decide whether the actions to take place are ethical or not. His actions should be a lesson to all who even dare attempt to replicate this event and the government should not hold back from protecting its digital frontlines.

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