Oliver Stone's 2016 film *Snowden* chronicles the life and actions of Edward Snowden, a former CIA and NSA contractor who famously leaked classified information about the U.S. government's mass surveillance programs in 2013. The film, based on books *The Snowden Files* by Luke Harding and *Time of the Octopus* by Anatoly Kucherena, follows Snowden's moral evolution and the personal struggles leading up to his decision to expose what he perceived as grave violations of citizens' privacy. This analysis will explore the film's major themes, character development, and its broader commentary on government surveillance, privacy, and the role of whistleblowers.

In "No Place to Hide", Glenn Greenwald emphasizes the massive scale of the NSA’s data collection efforts, stating that "the NSA collected data on virtually everyone, regardless of whether they were suspected of wrongdoing," highlighting the indiscriminate nature of the surveillance.

At the highest moment in *Snowden* the tension between national security and individual privacy raises an alarm. The film raises ethical questions about the extent to which governments should be allowed to monitor their citizens in the name of security. The film portrays Snowden as a patriot who initially believed in the U.S. government's mission to protect its citizens from terrorism but later becomes disillusioned upon realizing the scale of the NSA's surveillance operations. Even though Snowden had a meaningful reason to leak top secret information, his choices were later seen more as destructive.

The film argues that the trade-off between privacy and security is not as straightforward as it seems, suggesting that the unchecked power of mass surveillance not only threatens civil liberties but also erodes public trust in government institutions. Through Snowden's journey, Stone critiques the U.S. government's overreach and advocates for a more transparent, accountable system that respects privacy rights.

Edward Snowden's character arc is central to the film's narrative. Initially portrayed as a conservative patriot, Snowden is driven by a desire to protect his country following the 9/11 attacks. He excels in the CIA's training program and eventually rises to prominence within the NSA. However, as he becomes more deeply involved in the intelligence community, Snowden grapples with an increasing sense of unease about the programs he is working on.

In the Snowden Files it shows that “Snowden’s revelations showed that the NSA's surveillance was not only extensive but also indiscriminate, casting a wide net that included allies and enemies alike.” His data breach showed people that their lives may have been breached by the government. Since his attacks were so extensively damaging, it most likely would outweigh the heroism in the movie.

The film captures this internal conflict through Snowden's interactions with his superiors, colleagues, and girlfriend, Lindsay Mills (played by Shailene Woodley). Lindsay, who is more politically liberal, serves as a counterbalance to Snowden's initial beliefs and introduces him to alternative perspectives on government and civil liberties. Their relationship is portrayed as a key influence on Snowden's growing awareness of the ethical implications of his work.

The essential moment in Snowden's transformation occurs when he witnessed firsthand the global reach of the NSA’s surveillance programs. His growing moral conviction is evident when he begins questioning the justification for spying on ordinary citizens, realizing that the government’s actions are not limited to preventing terrorism but also include widespread data collection with little oversight.

SOURCES

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