Is Edward Snowden a hero or a villain? It bothers me that this is even a question, but it bothers me equally to realize that as I sit here today, I realize prior to enrolling in this class, a large part of me had become numb to the topic surrounding his name. I remember when he came forward and exposed what our government was doing, the uproar it caused. But I also remember institutional attempts to suppress that information, and that many I interacted with at the time had not read or even heard of the story, and that among those who had, there were individuals who thought of Snowden as a traitor. It felt to me like a nationwide conflict to control the narrative the public would settle on, which would not be surprising given the government’s behavior that he exposed.

When Snowden watched as James Clapper lied to congress, under oath, he realized there was no saving the intelligence community. He understood that while many who performed government work, whether as a federal employee or contractor, believed in the principles found in the constitution, none would come forward to expose the illegal and unconstitutional actions of our government. That moment, watching Clapper’s testimony, cemented for Snowden that he would have to be the one to do it, because the public had a right to know what the government was doing against the public’s interests, in the public’s name.

If we were to ask him in 2013 if regrets coming forward and informing the public, of course his answer would be no. Bart Gellman makes that very clear when he says “I found a guy who was almost Zen-like in his serenity and his comfort with what he had done, that he had consciously decided he was willing to take huge risks to provoke a public debate, and he provoked a public debate that no one could possibly have foreseen.” This statement has a depth to it which I’m sure Bart understood at the time.

Snowden is a very intelligent man, one who believed in what this country once stood for. To find out just how deep the corruption went, for a true patriot, would be earthshattering to their worldview. This is a defining moment for an individual, one which I think many of us experience at some point in our lives in one form or another, where everything we believed to be true comes crashing down. It’s in that moment we are presented a choice: we resign ourselves to the total lack of power and control we have over our own lives, succumbing to a loss of our individuality, and becoming just another mouth among the societal “herd,” or we pick ourselves up, look Fate directly in the face, and give it the proverbial “F\*\*\* you.”

I think this is what happened to Snowden, that he said “No” to that eternal force that comes after all of us eventually. He fought back, took control of his life and where it would lead him, whether that be to victory or through the pits of Hell. It would be his choice, and he’d try to reinvigorate Lady Liberty in the process.

That said, however… Look around. Was he successful? All week I’ve thought about to conversations I’ve listened to in podcasts, the discourse I see on social media, and it strikes me that people seem to have forgotten just how much the government really knows about them. We all “know” there’s surveillance happening on every “free” citizen in this country, yet we talk about it like we’ve retained some semblance of privacy to preserve. The conversations aren’t about regaining the privacy that’s been lost to us, and I think that’s because after Snowden, I am of the opinion that the intel agencies’ mode of operation shifted to damage control, encapsulating the mainstream media as a propaganda apparatus, which they then used to control the national conversation and over the years, shift the goal post.

So, if we were to ask Snowden today if he regrets his actions, I think, with some heavy speculation on my part, that he would say yes. Not that I believe he would prevent himself from doing what he did, but I think he may regret that he did not do more. And I think I would agree with him if he did.

I have always been a fan of “modern” (relative to the Greeks) philosophers like Henry David Thoreau, author of the essay “Civil Disobedience,” and Ralph Waldo Emerson, author of the essay “Self-Reliance.” Both men write of similar themes, avoiding conformity and hedonism, adhering to one’s principles regardless of the popular opinion of society around them, and striving for righteousness and virtue in our lives against tyranny and deceit. Founding father Thomas Jefferson similarly spoke of such things, with “If a law is unjust, a man is not only right to disobey it, he is obligated to do so.” being a misquote commonly attributed to him, though it’s been suggested it is a paraphrase of his contribution to the Declaration of Independence.

From the perspective of these great minds, with whom I’d agree, Snowden’s actions were not only ethically correct, but were a moral obligation which his peers had failed in their duties to fulfill. Regardless of whether his success had a lasting impact, it is for these reasons I view Snowden as a hero to this country. I wish he had a greater influence on us, so that we had not again grown so comfortable with our faux privacy fantasy and forgotten our need to be vigilant. The political and social chaos of the last decade certainly seems to have caused mass collection of data by our government to have almost completely fallen off our radar.