

GLENN GREENWALD

Unmasking the NSA

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Glenn Greenwald broke the story in *The Guardian* of Washington's widespread electronic dragnet. His exclusive interview with NSA contractor turned whistleblower Edward Snowden was an international media sensation. He is the author of *How Would a Patriot Act?*, *With Liberty and Justice for Some* and *No Place to Hide*. He is the recipient of the Izzy Award from the Park Center for Independent Media for his "path breaking journalistic courage and persistence in confronting conventional wisdom, official deception, and controversial issues." He also received an Online Journalism Award for Best Commentary for his coverage of Bradley Manning. He is co-founder of *The Intercept*.

It has been just over a year now since I went to Hong Kong and met with one of the most significant sources in journalism in American history, Edward Snowden. It's been an intense year for U.S. diplomatic relations with a whole variety of countries. It's been an intense year for a lot of media outlets and journalists in the world whose conduct over the past decade has really been called into serious question by the disclosures. And it has been a truly intense year for numerous populations in multiple countries on many continents around the world, who discovered that the massive surveillance system that has been built, that we all vaguely knew had existed, was directed not at a handful of terrorists or people engaged in serious violence, but was, in fact, directed at them.

I think one of the remarkable aspects of the last year has been how sustained the intensity is surrounding these issues. It's really not all that obvious that a year after the revelations began, I could go all over the world, which is what I've been doing in the last month in South America, in Europe, on the East Coast of the U.S. last month, and now on the West Coast of the U.S., and have rooms like this fill up with people interested in talking about these issues. It's really an extraordinary event.

I think one of the reasons that it's happened, maybe the main one, is one of the most underappreciated aspects of the last year, which is that the debate that has been triggered by the reporting that we were able to do is not just a debate about surveillance. In fact, I would say it's not even primarily a debate about surveillance. There is a wide array of equally profound issues, if not more profound issues, that have been seriously examined by many countries around the world. This has been a global debate, not a domestic one.

It has involved an examination of the role of individual privacy in the digital age, probably the first time that as a planet, as we put more and more of our communications on the line electronically, we are considering what the value of individual privacy is. It has entailed a debate about the dangers of vesting power in government entities and allowing them to exercise that power in the dark. It has triggered a debate about the role that the U.S. plays in the world and the vast difference between the branding

and marketing campaign that defined who President Obama was and his reality. It has triggered a truly, I think, profound debate about the role of journalism and the proper role of journalists vis-à-vis the state. So there have been all of these profound issues that have been debated over the last year, not just surveillance. I think that's one of the reasons why the intensity has remained so high in this issue.

Part of what has been great for me about being able to go around to events like this and being able to talk to people in person is that when you're doing this reporting and you have the obligation, which I've had for the last year, to work as hard as possible to get as many stories out as I possibly could in the seemingly endless archive of government secrets, you tend to focus us on story after individual story and focus really intensely on what the specific programs are that you're reporting and what the capabilities are that you're exposing, and the broader implications of the reporting can sometimes get obscured. One of the things I'm able to do by going around and having these kinds of discussions is it gives me a moment for the first time to take a step back and to think about how all of these issues really connect, why this will really be an enduring set of revelations.

One primary reason is that there has been so much said over the last year about all of these events, about what Edward Snowden did, about the reporting that we did, about the documents that he gave us, about what those documents revealed, so much said to the American media in particular, so much of which is just wrong, is just completely false. It's funny, if you were somebody who loves to bash the American media and talk about how awful they are—and I am somebody who completely loves to do that; it's one of my favorite things to do, I've been doing it for many years now—it doesn't come as a surprise to learn that so much of what is conveyed and represented in the American media in this really authoritative, objective tone that they like to use is completely false. That probably doesn't come as a surprise to anybody, certainly not to people who were of adult age in the run-up to the Iraq war. That lesson is a lesson that has been well learned by most of us. But when you're in

the middle of one of these stories that's being talked about by the media to such an extent and you actually have firsthand knowledge of what's happening, your appreciation for the U.S. media's ability and willingness to spout absolute falsehoods escalates dramatically. I am somebody who has been incredibly cynical of the media, and yet I was shocked by the things I saw over the past year just in terms of pure falsity getting passed off as truth.

So one of the things I wanted to do is to be able to just set the record straight and to set forth the evidence that I have seen and that I know myself firsthand to create a historical account about what actually happened. The myths that got disseminated are sometimes so extreme, and yet they endure to this day in a way that's quite remarkable.

One of the myths that has gotten repeated over and over by defenders of the U.S. Government and by defenders of the NSA, is the idea that Edward Snowden has always been, or at least is now, a Russian spy. I know it is hilarious. And yet if you listen to CNN or MSNBC or certainly Fox or any of the major network news shows on Sunday, this is something that gets stated over and over with a great deal of seriousness. How people maintain a straight face when they say it is a mystery to me, and yet they do.

One of the things that is remarkable to me when I went back and I looked at the things that were being said in June of last year, when I was in Hong Kong. I was blissfully ignorant of the things the American media were saying about Edward Snowden and the reporting we were doing because I was focused on the articles. But I went back and I looked at a lot of this. And what's most amazing is that the people who now say that Edward Snowden is a Russian spy, and they say it with such conviction and certainty, in June of 2013, when he was in Hong Kong before he had left for Moscow, those very same people were going on the very same shows and saying, "Oh, there's no doubt that he is a Chinese spy. This is just obvious." Then the minute he left Hong Kong and went to Moscow, seamlessly the whole narrative shifted, without any recognition of what they were saying just weeks earlier. I'm convinced that if he somehow managed tomorrow to travel from Moscow to, I don't know, Lima, these same people would be saying, "Oh, obviously, he was a Peruvian spy the entire time." They'll just say anything.

My favorite instance of this occurred really recently. There was an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* by Edward J. Epstein, who frequently writes op-eds in places like *The Wall Street Journal*. I'm just going to read the quote, because it's my favorite quote ever. This is what he said. He had spoken to a senior Obama cabinet minister who off the record assured him, "There are only three possibilities for the Snowden heist: one, it was a Russian espionage operation; two, it was a Chinese espionage operation; or,

three, it was a joint Sino-Russian operation." I love that so much. What that really means, of course, is, We have absolutely no idea what happened here, but we need to malign and demean him and demonize him as much as we can, so we will just say anything.

The whole time there was so much evidence, so much obvious evidence, that negated this, beginning with the fact that when he was in Hong Kong, he was forced to leave by the government in Hong Kong and in Beijing, not really the treatment typically extended to Chinese spies. And when he arrived in Moscow, he was forced to wait for five weeks in the international transit zone of the Moscow airport as the Putin government negotiated with the U.S. government about what the Russians could get in exchange for handing him over. Not exactly the treatment that the Russian government typically extends to valuable Russian spies.

But more important than that was the fact that he actually never chose to be in Russia in the first place. It was a pure accident that he ended up there. He was trying to transit through on his way to Havana, which had promised him safe passage, and then to Ecuador, where he intended to seek asylum. The reason he ended up in Moscow was on the flight to Moscow the U.S. government unilaterally, without any due process, revoked his passport, just declared his passport invalid. Did you know the government can do that? Just one day decide that they're going to declare your passport invalid? That's what they did. And then they bullied the Cubans into rescinding their offer of safe passage. The reason he was in Moscow was because he got trapped there by the U.S. government, which then turned around and used their apologists in the media to use the fact that he was forced to be in Moscow as proof that he was a Russian spy.

On top of which, if Edward Snowden were a Russian spy, or a spy of any kind, think about all the things that he could have done with the material that he had. He could have sold it for tens of millions of dollars to multiple intelligence agencies around the world and be extraordinarily rich for the rest of his life. Or he could have passed it secretly to American adversaries if he had malignant intent. He did none of that. He came to journalists and asked journalists with well-regarded media institutions to carefully vet the material to inform his fellow citizens about the kind of debate that he thought we ought to be having. The very antithesis of what a spy does, let alone a spy for oppressive regimes.

You can look at media behavior and be shocked that they allowed this accusation to be aired over and over again, not just because there was so much evidence negating it but because there was no evidence ever supporting it. There has never been a shred of evidence that he has cooperated in any way with any government. There has been a historical attack on whistleblowers. If you go back and look at what the Nixon administration was saying about Daniel Ellsberg in 1971 and 1972, John

Ehrlichman was going before Congress and saying, We think Daniel Ellsberg is a Russian spy. So there are all these sorts of reasons we should have known on its face that the accusation was false, to the point where it was not even something that should be aired by responsible media outlets.

But the reason those kinds of accusations get aired I think is important and interesting, which is that it really says so much more about the people voicing the accusations and the people who give it credence than it does the target of the accusation, which is Edward Snowden. The reality is that Edward Snowden did what he did because as an act of conscience he was so disturbed by what he perceived to be this extremely dangerous and unjust system of surveillance that he had no choice but to come forward and do what he could to stop it, even if it meant sacrificing his liberty and everything else that he valued in his life. But in order to believe that that was really the reason, you have to believe that people are capable of acting out of conscience and out of conviction and in defense of political values. The people who insist that he's Russian spy and the media elites who propagate these myths don't believe that about him because they don't believe that about themselves. Because they know that they never act out of conscience, that they don't have any political convictions, that they never take steps to sacrifice their own interests in defense of political ideals. Therefore, they don't believe that anybody else can do that either. So they search for other hidden motives that prove that the person is actually doing this for all sorts of corrupted ends. It's a reflection of their own emptiness and corruption, not of the people whom they're condemning.

Then there was this other thing that got said about him over and over, and still gets said about him, that I find even more interesting and more amazing, which is that Edward Snowden did what he did because he's "fame-seeking narcissist." The thing that really amazed me about this was that when I went back and looked at the discourse about this in the U.S. during those weeks after we began our reporting, though I wasn't aware of this at the time, was that this phrase, "fame-seeking narcissist," got repeated over and over by so many different American pundits. People like Bob Schieffer, the host of *Face the Nation*, and David Brooks, the *New York Times* columnist, and Richard Cohen, the *Washington Post* columnist, and Jeffrey Toobin, the legal analyst for CNN, all somehow came up with this phrase instantaneously, literally within 48 hours of our unveiling Edward Snowden. We unveiled him on June 10th. That was when we posted the video and wrote about who our source was. Within 48 hours—I mean this literally; you can Google it—all of these American pundits had simultaneously decided that they were capable of psychologically assessing this person about whom they knew absolutely nothing and had never met in their entire life. And not only did they all decide

that they were going to psychologically assess him, diagnose him from a distance as a "fame-seeking narcissist," they all did it instantaneously.

I'm somebody who, if you had told me three or four years ago that media elites get together and coordinate their messaging, I would have said, "No, I don't actually think that's true. I think they just end up saying the same thing because they're herd animals who just parrot what each other is saying, without any coordination." But the degree to which they all latched on to the same phrase and the same psychological diagnosis in such a short period of time was really striking to me. Almost enough to make me believe that they were getting some kind of secret messages from some underground lair somewhere about the script from which they were supposed to be reading.

First of all, just as is true for the idea that he was a Russian spy, this idea that Edward Snowden is some sort of fame-seeking narcissist is literally the exact opposite of reality. The very first conversation I ever had with Edward Snowden, before I even met him, before I knew his name, before I knew what he looked like, was over the Internet, when I was in Brazil and he was in Hong Kong. He said to me, "I am determined to unveil myself to the world as the source of these documents, even though I know that doing so will likely send me to prison for the rest of my life. And the reason for that is that I believe I have the obligation to account to the world for what I did. And since I don't think that what I'm doing is wrong, I'm not going to hide in shame. I'm going to come out and proudly identify myself as the source." But," he said, "Once I do that, I am going to disappear from the sight of the media. I am going to disappear completely." And the reason he said he was going to do that was because he knew that the goal of the media, the instinct would be to try and personalize the focus on him instead of where he wanted the focus to remain, which was on the substance of what these revelations showed. So he said, "I don't want any attention for myself. I want to disappear from the media sight."

Literally for the next six months after we unveiled him, I had every single big TV star, all of those TV actors who play the role of journalists on television, calling me pleading to arrange for an interview with Snowden. He rejected every single one of those. He literally could have been the most famous person in the world, on prime time every single night, and yet he categorically refused to do any interviews. The one he just did with NBC in Moscow was the first-ever interview he did after that interview that we did back in Hong Kong a year later. The reason was because he wanted no attention on him. Really kind of weird behavior for a fame-seeking narcissist, I think.

But the complete lack of evidence for this claim and all the evidence that negates it is probably the least interesting part about this labeling of him in this way. I thought about this a lot. In every single instance, literally, when a whistleblower emerges, or not even a

whistleblower, any actual dissident, they get attacked almost invariably as being mentally ill, as suffering from some kind of psychological affliction, as having personality attributes that make you want to run as far away from them as you possibly can.

Look at how whistleblowers have been treated or people who bring uncomfortable revelations are treated or people who meaningfully dissent. I don't mean people who stand up and say, "I'm a Democrat and I don't like the Republicans" or "I'm a Republican and I don't like the Democrats." That's the kind of dissent that we're allowed to do. I'm talking about real dissent, when you decide that you're going to go so far as to break laws in protest of and in defiance of fundamental injustices. That kind of dissent. Anybody who does that is maligned as being mentally unstable.

One of the most fascinating examples to me is there was this instance in 2011 when WikiLeaks leaked, first, multiple documents about the war in Afghanistan, and then many more about the war in Iraq. The documents about the war in Iraq were much more significant than the ones in Afghanistan, because they documented extreme war crimes that the U.S. government and its partners in the Iraqi military were committing deliberately, and that there were huge numbers of civilian deaths that people didn't know about, atrocities of the worst kind that these documents revealed.

The New York Times, which partnered with WikiLeaks to report on these materials, the day that those documents were released had a nice front-page headline that said, "Documents reveal U.S. atrocities in Iraq," and then right next to it, almost as prominent, if not as prominent, was an article about Julian Assange written by the pro-war correspondent for *The New York Times*, John Burns. The article dissected all of Julian Assange's personality traits and depicted him as this bizarre, paranoid freak who didn't wash his clothes and slept on his friends' couches and looked around the corner thinking, weirdly, that somebody might be after him, even though he was in the middle of the biggest national security leak in American history, so maybe that was a pretty rational fear. But the idea was to make him be viewed as so personally unappealing that you actually wanted to turn away from the very serious revelations of what those documents showed. It literally got equal billing.

The same thing happened with Chelsea Manning and her revelations. If you read what she actually was saying, it's the model of rationality. She was saying that she joined the Army because she believed in the cause of the war in Iraq, and she slowly and gradually discovered the extreme levels of corruption and abuse that were taking place as part of this war and decided that she not only didn't want to be part of it anymore but wanted the world to know about all of the secret, hidden atrocities that were taking place and therefore leaked these documents in order to trigger reform. Whatever else you think about what she

did, that is a model of rational thinking. Yet instantly the U.S. media decided that the reason she did what she did was because of her struggles with her "gender disorder," as they called it, or because of childhood conflicts with her father.

This is the tactic over and over that gets invoked. And it isn't just about trying to distract attention away from the revelations or make you so uncomfortable with the disclosures that these whistleblowers and dissidents bring. That is an important part of it, but there's something more pernicious going on, more subtle but more pernicious. That is this. If somebody steps out that extremely and breaks laws in order to dissent, the premise of these attacks—that Julian Assange is some paranoid freak, that Chelsea Manning only did it because she was struggling with her gender disorder, that Daniel Ellsberg is a swinger and in love with his sister, that Edward Snowden is a fame-seeking narcissist—is that if you dissent in that way, then it automatically means that there is some kind of disturbed psychological undercurrent that has caused you to do that, that it can only be explained by a psychological affliction.

The premise there is that the status quo is so fundamentally good, that the American political system is so at its core designed to give us freedom and choice, that only someone mentally disturbed would think that it was unjust enough to merit that level of protest and objection. It's really a way of implicitly teaching and indoctrinating that the only mentally stable and healthy choice is to comply or submit or acquiesce to the prevailing order, and that anyone who doesn't do that by definition is demonstrating some kind of psychological affliction. That's a really subtle yet powerful message to convey.

The fallacy of it is that while, of course, it's possible that people who dissent in a radical or meaningful way, namely, breaking laws to do it, are motivated in some cases by some kind of psychological drive as opposed to political beliefs, it's also the case that oftentimes, in fact many times, people who don't dissent, who instead choose to acquiesce, are doing so because of psychological afflictions as well. Perhaps it's authoritarianism, perhaps it's cowardice, perhaps it's excessive groupthink. But this idea that the only people whose psychological motives we assess are those who dissent, but we never psychologically analyze those who refrain from dissent, is a really odious notion, because it inherently delegitimizes the idea of dissent.

I think it's very reasonable question to ask, who is actually the psychologically disturbed person? Chelsea Manning, who comes forward and wants to reveal to the world the atrocities that the U.S. is committing in Iraq, or all of the people who decide that those atrocities aren't enough to make them object in a meaningful way? Or who is it who is really psychologically disturbed? Julian Assange, who decides that this massive secrecy regime is dangerous and menacing, or the tens of thousands of

people who work within it every day who do nothing about it? Or who is psychologically disturbed? Edward Snowden for deciding that all of us should know about the extreme invasions of our privacy to which we're being subjected in secret on a daily basis or the tens of thousands of people who knew about it and did nothing and the officials who perpetrated it? That's a really important debate to have. The idea that you are mentally ill if you dissent, that is the debate that that tactic is designed to suppress.

I just want to talk about one last myth. That is the idea that the only reason the surveillance state has been constructed is because our government officials have this really deep and abiding desire to keep us safe. This is really just about finding and monitoring the communications of people who are engaged in terrorism or other kinds of violent plots. It is genuinely shocking to me that anybody can stand up in public and say that after the last year without having their reputation instantly obliterated.

So much of the spying that we've revealed over the last year so plainly has nothing to do with any of that, whether it's spying on democratic allies like the president of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, or the chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, or spying on oil companies throughout Latin America or economic summits or on all sorts of populations around the world en masse who plainly have nothing to do with terrorism. There's so much of that that has been revealed that just has no connection to that claim at all.

But even more compelling are the NSA's own documents which really lay bare exactly what their institutional mandate and objective are in really clear language. These are the things they said when they thought nobody was listening and that you would never see. The motto of the NSA—the motto, their institutional phrase that governs what they are about—is “Collect it all.” Not “Collect communications of terrorists” or “Collect some of it” or “Collect a lot of it.” It's “Collect it all.”

I think the NSA is actually owed a lot of thanks, they certainly have my gratitude for producing documents that are this clear and easy to understand—“Our new collection posture.” And then there is a little circle and it has six phrases that define what their collection posture is. At the top it says, “Collect it all.” And then it says, “Exploit it all,” “Process it all,” “Sniff it all,” “Partner it all,” and “Know it all.”

They are collecting every single day billions of emails and telephone calls. They have entire populations under surveillance on a daily basis, including our own. It is the largest system of suspicionless surveillance ever created in human history. The idea that they can still stand up in public and say this is about terrorism and have the U.S. media and all sorts of other people take that seriously is

one of the most powerful indictments of just how rotted our political discourse really is.

One of the most important parts of the debate we've had over the last year is about the notion of privacy and what privacy means to the individual and to individual freedom. This is actually not an easy argument to have. It's a hard case to make, why privacy matters so much. People have a really easy time understanding, for obvious reasons, and for good reasons, why feeding their children or having health care or having a job is this immediate question of survival. They have a harder time understanding why privacy deserves the same level of protection, because it tends to be a more abstract and ethereal and seemingly remote value.

So it's not uncommon—I hear it all the time—for people, even people in good faith, reasonable people, to say, “You know, I just am not one of those people who is doing bad things, and therefore I don't have anything to hide.” And “I don't really mind if people read my emails, because I have nothing to hide.” The CEO of Google put this in the purest and most disgusting manner. He was asked in an interview about Google's systematic invasions of privacy, and he said, “You know, if you want to hide something, if you're so worried about somebody knowing what it is that you're doing or saying, that's probably a really good sign that you shouldn't be doing it.” The premise being that the only people who have something to hide are people who are doing something evil, something wrong, something criminal.

One of the fascinating parts about this claim is that the people who say “I don't really have anything to hide, because I'm not doing anything wrong” don't actually mean it. The way that you know that they don't actually mean it is that these same people put passwords on their email and social media accounts and they put locks on their bedroom and bathroom doors. And there are all sorts of things that they say and do and that they would only say and do when they think that nobody is watching or listening, that they would never in a million years say if they thought other people were knowing what it was that they were doing. There are all sorts of things that we have to hide as individuals that have nothing to do with violence or criminality. The fact is that people instinctively seek out privacy, to the point that every single time, literally, over the last year when somebody has said to me, “You know, I really don't have anything to hide; I don't actually care if people know what I'm doing, because I'm not one of those people who have done something wrong,” I've said the same thing every single time. Try this and you will see the same result. I've said, “Okay, here's my email,” and I give them my email account. “What I'd like you to do is email me all of the passwords to your email and social media accounts so that I can just troll through everything that you're doing and writing and publish at will whatever I feel like publishing under your name. You're not doing anything wrong. You

should have nothing to hide.” And not a single person, not one, has taken me up on this offer.

There was this remarkable op-ed early on, after we had published the article revealing that the NSA was collecting what they called the metadata for every single American. Metadata seems really technical when you call it that. What it is actually is the list of every single person with whom we’re communicating: who is calling us, who are we calling, how long are we speaking for, where are we when we speak, who is emailing us, and who are we emailing. And Dianne Feinstein, the cheerleader of the Senate Intelligence Committee, who is the NSA’s best friend in Congress by far, wrote an op-ed in *USA Today* saying, I don’t even understand why people are so upset by this. In fact, I don’t even understand why they’re calling this spying. It’s not really spying on somebody if you’re not reading the content of their email, if you’re not listening to the content of your phone, all you’re doing is collecting the list of all the people with whom they’re communicating.

The reason why that is absurd to the point of being offensive I think is obvious. Think about how much somebody can learn about you, how intimate they can get in terms of their understanding of what you’re doing just by having what they call the metadata. If you’re a woman who calls an abortion clinic or you’re somebody who calls a physician who is an HIV specialist or you call a drug or alcohol addiction hotline or you call a suicide hotline or you speak with somebody who isn’t your spouse late at night, collecting all that information will enable people to know some of the most intimate information about you, in fact, sometimes more probing and more invasive and more intimate than if they were listening to the content itself.

But one of the things about Dianne Feinstein’s claim was that there grew this sort of online movement instantly after her op-ed that called for Dianne Feinstein to be true to her words. If spying isn’t really collecting all this information, then every single day at the end of her workday she or one of her 8,000 assistants should post online a list of all the people with whom she emailed and telephoned that day and all the people she met in person and spoke to. Of course, she would never do that.

Because we all instinctively understand why privacy is so fundamental to human freedom. It’s something that we all seek out instinctively and as human beings always have. We are social animals. We do need other people to know what we’re saying and doing and to hear what it is we’re doing and saying. That’s why people voluntarily post things about themselves online and why they’ve always sought out human interaction. But just as essential to what it means to be human is having places we can go where we can think and read and be and choose and act without judgmental eyes being cast upon us.

There are all kinds of social science research, but I think our own personal experiences are even more compelling, that demonstrate that when we think or believe that other

people are watching what we’re doing or monitoring us or judging us, our range of options shrinks considerably. When we think other people are watching, our behavior becomes more conformist and more compliant. We do the things that we think other people want us to do and will judge us well for, because as human beings we all try to avoid shame and being condemned and being denounced. It is only the realm that we can go to where nobody else is watching or judging us that is the realm where creativity and dissent and exploration about who we are as people exclusively resides.

A world in which there is no private realm is a world that becomes much less interesting, much less creative, much more submissive and compliant and obedient, which is why governments love surveillance—because it instills those behavioral values in people. You have not a physical prison that you get put into but a prison that enters your mind. That is what the true purpose and the true outcome of a surveillance state is. I think we all instinctively understand that, but I think the ability to sit back and think about why privacy is so important is a really crucial part of the debate that we’ve had over the last year.

I want to spend a little bit of time talking about the motive for this system, because that is a question that I get asked all the time. I think people by now are convinced that the NSA and its partner governments and other agencies in the U.S. security state are truly devoted to the elimination of privacy in the digital age. That is not hyperbole. I mean by that that they want to take and store and, when they want, analyze and monitor every single communication event that takes place by and between human beings on the planet electronically, on the Internet and by the telephone. You don’t need to take my word for that. Their own documents, as I said earlier, demonstrate that that’s their goal. But that then leads to the question of why the U.S. government would want to create a system that does that. What is the core motive that has driven this system to be created?

Motives can sometimes be really difficult to ascertain, so I think we have a hard time understanding our own motives, let alone other people’s. And when you’re talking about an institution this large, it becomes a very difficult question to ask. It’s like asking, Why did the U.S. invade Iraq? It’s almost impossible to answer that, because different factions responsible for that invasion had very different motives. Sometimes they had mixed motives and complex motives. It’s a hard question to answer. But one thing I can tell you for sure about the motive of the system is that it has nothing to do with the motive they claim. It has nothing to do with stopping terrorism or keeping the population safe.

This is one way that I know that. If you read what the 9/11 Commission said, which was designed to investigate why the U.S. government, with all of its surveillance capabilities, even back then, failed to detect a plot of this magnitude, what it concluded was that the problem was

not that the U.S. government had failed to gather all of the information it needed to know this plot was coming. In fact, the opposite was true. They had in their possession all of the intelligence necessary to piece together to know that the 9/11 attack was coming. The reason that they failed to detect the plot was because they had collected so much information that they were incapable of understanding the significance and the meaning of what it was that they had. So the response to this diagnosis was for them to say, You know what, let's go now and collect even more. Which is like being told that you have lung cancer and walking out of the office and saying, "I'm now going to smoke five packs of cigarettes more a day than I was before." It makes no sense. It clearly is not the purpose.

When you are collecting every single communication event that takes place in the world and storing it, it becomes impossible to find the people who are talking about attacking the Boston Marathon or blowing up trains in Madrid or London or detonating a plane above Detroit or a bomb in the middle of Times Square. It is impossible to find what you claim you're looking for in constructing the system. Which is why they don't find those things.

If that isn't the motive, the question then becomes, what is the motive? Why has the system expanded to the point it has?

I think one significant reason is that in the wake of 9/11 we just decided to drown the national security state with enormous amounts of money. When you drown bureaucracies with money, they will rapidly expand without limit. Every day they will wake up and think, How we can we expand our power and authority? But the more important part is that when you drown agencies with all that money, it creates an immense profit motive. Seventy-five percent of the intelligence budget of the NSA goes into the coffers of private corporations, which means every time the surveillance state expands, every time there's a new capability, every time there's a new target that is warranting a new system, the corporations that run the national security state make more and more money.

But the key reason, that I think should never be overlooked, is that surveillance vests governments that wield it with enormous amounts of power. If you can know everything that a citizenry is doing, especially at a time when you are creating higher and higher walls of secrecy behind which you're operating, the power imbalance becomes immense. It becomes virtually impossible for that citizenry to challenge in any meaningful way the people who are wielding power. I think the surveillance state is part of a wildly underappreciated trend, which is that we have allowed all of these very radical powers and extremist policies to take root in the name of the War on Terror.

What has happened over the last four or five years, as the War on Terror has wound down, is that these policies began to be imported onto American soil, aimed at

Americans instead of existing on foreign soil, aimed at foreigners. Which is why you see the use of drones now coming away from Iraq and Somalia and Pakistan and Yemen into the U.S. Or why you see the paramilitarized police forces that once patrolled the streets of Baghdad now visible in all American cities, used to crush, for example, the Occupy movement. Or you see the extreme levels of government secrecy that justify more secrecy being used domestically as well. Or you see the idea that the U.S. government can assassinate foreigners without due process now being aimed at Americans. This system of surveillance, which was pioneered in Iraq under the "Collect it all" banner by Keith Alexander, who was in Iraq at the time, before he became NSA chief, also has been now imported onto American soil.

There's a real question about why that would happen. What explains this trend of importing these increasingly extreme policies that were once used to justify winning a war and are now used to aim at the American population? I think it's really important not to underestimate the extent to which people who wield power in the U.S. fear political and social instability, largely as a result of huge amounts of economic inequality. In previously stable Western countries, like Spain or England or Greece or Italy, there have been sustained riots in the streets. Even if the U.S. there were two political movements, one from the right, one from the left, that got successfully co-opted and crushed—the Occupy movement and the Tea Party movement—that signaled that there was such severe discontent in the U.S. that genuine instability, even some kind of a rebellion outside of the ballot box, was possible. And there's a real fear about this instability worsening, because the economic inequality that has come from the 2008 financial crisis is not going anywhere.

When you have a fear of instability, social instability and political instability, elites can respond in two ways: they can either think about how to placate the anger that causes the instability by reforming and by redressing those problems—and I don't think our elites are even remotely interested in doing that—or you can say, How is it that we can empower ourselves and shield ourselves so that we can prevent that anger and instability from truly undermining our power? One way to do that is by consolidating the instruments and weapons used for population control. All of these weapons that were once used against foreign populations are now being imported onto American soil, with the surveillance state being one of the most potent means of control. It's easy to think about that as some kind of conspiratorial thinking, but the reality is that states have always craved potent surveillance because of the way that it does breed compliance and submission in populations that know they're being watched.

The last point I wanted to make is the one that I get asked about the most, which is, Well, you've talked about all these interesting things that have happened in the last

year and there have been all these fantastic debates, but what has really changed about anything? The NSA is still spying and the U.S. national security state is still as powerful as ever. So what kind of changes really have taken place?

One of the things that I think it's important to think about is the way that change happens. It's really easy to give in to this idea that change happens overnight, and there is a sort of instant gratification desire, that I want to see the building of the NSA collapsed. And if it's not collapsed and if it's still standing, I'm going to conclude that there have not really been any changes. The U.S. national security state is the most powerful part of the U.S. government, which is the most powerful government on earth. The NSA is not going to collapse because we published some of their documents and there's a bunch of anger around the world. It's really important not to look to the U.S. government as the source that's going to impose real limits on the power of the U.S. government, because that's just not how power gets exercised. People don't walk around thinking about how to unilaterally limit their own power.

But there are some really promising signs. There are countries around the world—influential, significant countries—that are genuinely furious about what they've learned and that are working together to undermine American hegemony of the Internet. I think even more significant is the fact that U.S. technology companies, like Facebook and Google and Yahoo and Microsoft, are genuinely petrified, in a really pleasing way, about the impact that the surveillance system is going to have on their future business interests. They don't care at all about your privacy or about the privacy of their users. And the proof of that is that when nobody knew it was happening, they very eagerly cooperated with the NSA, well beyond what the law required them to do, because of all the benefits they were getting and the lack of cost, because nobody knew that was happening. But now they're extremely worried that all of you, aware of what they're doing to your privacy—and especially what 14-year-olds and 12-year-olds and 10-year-olds will think—are no longer willing to use the companies that you know are turning your data over to the NSA and are collaborating with the NSA, that you will be vulnerable to appeals by Brazilian and German and Korean companies that “You should use our products and not theirs because we won't violate your privacy.”

The U.S. government doesn't care at all about public opinion polls or about public anger over surveillance, but they definitely care about what Silicon Valley billionaires think. These Silicon Valley tycoons are imposing genuine pressure now on the U.S. government to limit that surveillance and also creating ways to convince the public that their systems are safe.

But I think the cause of the greatest optimism for me about the changes that have taken place is that when

people understand the extent to which their privacy is being compromised, they start taking matters into their own hands. There really are all sorts of technological programs of encryption and other means of rendering your online activities anonymous that are effective, that keep the NSA and other governments out of what you're doing on the Internet. The problem is that right now there are maybe 10,000 people in the world who use encryption. And in the NSA's warped mind, if you use encryption, which means that you're trying to hide from them what you're saying and doing, it probably means you're somebody suspicious, because only bad people would want to hide what they're doing and saying from the NSA. So they're able to go target people now who use encryption. But if 10 million people used encryption instead of 10,000, they will no longer be able to do that. That will create meaningful walls around our communications that the NSA and other governments can't invade. That's one of the reasons why, even though there aren't these genuine reform bills coming out of Congress, and won't be, I'm very optimistic about the prospects for change.

I think it's really easy, if you are a citizen who believes that there are serious injustices in your country, to give in to this kind of defeatism, this idea that these forces are so formidable and so powerful and so entrenched that there is just really nothing that I can do about them. I can vote for this party or that party, and nothing seems to change. The same factions continue to reign. So I really don't feel like there is much that I can do. I just feel helpless. A lot of people turn away from political injustice because of that temptation of defeatism, which is very compelling and powerful for all of us. It's one of the things the government wants to instill in us, this learned helplessness, this idea that there's actually nothing that we can do.

One of the lessons, I think the most profound lesson, that I learned in the last year from working with Edward Snowden, something that will, I think, really shape how I view the world for the rest of my life, is the lesson that we can learn from what he did. He is someone who is 29 years old. He grew up in a house that was lower-middle class to poor. His father was in the Coast Guard for 30 years. He had no position or power or prestige of any kind. He was an obscure employee working for a large corporation. And through nothing more than an act of conscience, an act of fearlessness, a choice in defense of political convictions, acting more or less on his own, he really did change the world. He changed how hundreds of millions of people around the planet think about that wide array of topics I began by enumerating.

There are all sorts of lessons throughout history of powerless, obscure individuals through acts of conscience changing the world, whether it be Rosa Parks refusing to sit at the back of the bus or a street vendor in Tunisia lighting himself on fire and sparking a rebellion across a

major region against the world's most entrenched dictators. There are all kinds of lessons that should forever negate our succumbing to this temptation of defeatism.

But for me, watching this 29-year-old give up his entire life, out of the knowledge that he didn't want to have on his conscience for the rest of his life the idea that he could have done something about an injustice but failed to do so, and sparked this massive ripple effect around the world, where all kinds of other people, including me, got infected with the courage he displayed. The huge numbers of journalists and media outlets that previously would never have touched material like this that were eager to prove that they were willing to publish aggressively, to all new sources that are now coming forward to copy the template that he created, the consciousness changes that he has engendered underscore that all of us as individuals always do have the power within us. If we summon the right will and unleash the right amount of passion, we all have that ability to find within ourselves how we can change the world. There are probably different ways that we can contribute, there are different skills and resources that we have. But the one thing that this should always teach us is that defeatism is always deceitful, it's always unwarranted, and it's always baseless.

With that, I thank you all very, very much for listening.

For information about obtaining CDs, MP3s, or transcripts of this or other programs, please contact:

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