

Book Review

Permanent Record by Edward Snowden

Edward Snowden's autobiographical account, *Permanent Record*, is an intriguing description of his life-changing decision to abandon his country and family by disclosing thousands of classified documents to journalists about top-secret surveillance programmes in the US and UK. As such, it should have a warning on the front cover cautioning that it should not be read if you are predisposed to moments of uncontrollable suspicion and distrust. It should also forewarn that if you were not alarmed before about the intelligence and surveillance apparatus in the US and UK, then you probably will be after reading this book.

Although not presented as a normative textbook, this highly interesting account is full of useful information. It details the inner workings of the US National Security Agency (NSA) and, to a lesser extent, the UK intelligence communication headquarters (GCHQ), and their alleged data collection programmes after 9/11. It explains how the methods used by the US and UK intelligence agencies evolved after 9/11 to include cyberintelligence collection. It also makes a significant contribution to the ongoing contemporary debate about the role of intelligence agencies in maintaining national security while simultaneously protecting our rights to freedom and privacy.

Throughout, this book is as much about Snowden himself as it is about the deliberate actions he took to disclose the so-called mass-surveillance programmes. Before reading his autobiography, I, like many other people, thought Snowden was an unpatriotic traitor. I believed that some warped sense of duty, or maybe just vanity, led him to deliberately abuse the trust placed in him to protect his country. However, his argument for his actions is somewhat persuasive, and he goes to great lengths to convince the reader that he and his family were patriots. For Snowden, 9/11 was determinate in many ways. Like many others at that time, he joined the army to serve his country in the fight against global terrorism. Snowden was medically discharged from the army after he injured himself during basic training. Although initially despondent, he continued with his patriotic duty and found a contractor job that put his technical and computing skills to work serving the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and NSA.

Snowden, in his role as a contractor systems analyst and administrator, had unfettered access to classified information held by the CIA and NSA. It was with this high-level access that he became “disturbed” (p.171) about untargeted, indiscriminate surveillance programmes. He also came across a top-secret document about the continuance of the STELLARWIND initiative. The document explained “that the agency's mission had been transformed, from using technology to defend America to using technology to control it by redefining citizens’ private internet communications as potential signals intelligence” (p.175).

In the second part of the book, Snowden recounts that, while working for the NSA in Japan, he had his “atomic moment” (p.184) about how new technologies (like those in the surveillance programmes) were being used. Snowden was troubled that “once the ubiquity of collection was combined with the permanency of storage, all any government had to do was select a person or a group to scapegoat or go searching—as I’d gone searching through the agency’s files—for evidence of suitable crime”. He further states in the book “that if my generation didn’t intervene the escalation would only continue. It would be a tragedy if, by the time we’d finally resolved to resist, such resistance would be futile” (p.184).

Troubled by what he believed to be unconstitutional behaviour by the NSA, Snowden used his top-secret clearance to access files that he later used as prima-facie evidence of personal communication data being illegally intercepted, collected and stored for perpetuity. The last part of the book contains a captivating, step-by-step, account of how Snowden used microSD cards to beat all of the NSA system defences and smuggle out the documentary evidence which he disclosed to journalists Glen Greenwald, Ewen MacAskill and Laura Poitras in 2013. Snowden also revealed to the journalists a range of secret NSA and GCHQ data collection programmes such as PRISM, TURBULENCE, TURMOIL and XKEYSCORE. According to Snowden, XKEYSCORE was the jewel in the crown, best “understood as a search engine that lets an analyst search through all records of your life. Imagine a kind of Google ... that returns results from your private email, your private chats, your private files, everything” (p.276).

The prose is eloquent and compelling. It is used to good effect to craft an intellectual and seductive argument as to why it was necessary to take the action that he did, knowing that he would be accused of being a traitor and damaging the security of his country. In this way, the

book teases you, inciting inner conflict and turmoil as you think about what you would do in these circumstances. If you agree with Snowden's actions, the book may reveal your inadequacies. It forces you to consider whether, if in Snowden's position, you would have had the courage to stand up for what you believed was right and just.

There are many paradoxes in this book, the most poignant being that Snowden had to break the law himself in order to reveal that the US government was itself breaking the law with its bulk data collection and mass-surveillance programmes. Regardless, the consequences for Snowden are now somewhat ironic as he will probably have to spend the rest of his life in exile in a country from which the very programmes he complained about sought to protect us. Although the book makes a persuasive argument that Snowden is, in fact, a whistleblower and not a traitor, it is unlikely to reach and convince the nationalist masses. It is also clear that being an intelligence whistleblower is not for the faint-hearted.