

Edward Snowden in the court of public opinion

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For nearly three weeks, Edward Snowden has been trapped in Moscow's Sheremetevo airport. His life is in danger, as the US political establishment and its military/intelligence apparatus direct their efforts to seizing and forcefully returning him to the United States—or worse. The Obama administration has already filed charges against him under the Espionage Act for exposing secret and illegal spying programs run by the US government.

From the US political and media establishment, Snowden has received scorn, hatred and abuse. He has been denounced as a “traitor” by leading politicians of both the Democratic and Republican parties, with the mass media, both right and “left,” branding him a criminal.

There is, however, immense popular support for Snowden. According to a recent poll from Quinnipiac University, 55 percent of the American population consider Snowden to be a “whistle-blower,” while only 35 percent say he is a “traitor.”

Among younger people, the sentiment is even more overwhelming, with 68 percent of 18-29 year-olds saying he is a whistle-blower, and 60 percent of 30-44 year-olds. Those with lower incomes are more likely to support Snowden's actions as those of a whistle-blower.

Peter Brown, the assistant director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, was compelled to acknowledge that this sentiment—with the majority backing Snowden in nearly every category—“goes against almost the unified view of the nation's political establishment.”

The same poll also registered a dramatic shift in popular perceptions of government spying programs. When asked what concerns them most about the government's “anti-terrorism policies,” 45 percent said

that the government had “gone too far in restricting the average person's civil liberties,” and only 40 percent said it had “not gone far enough to adequately protect the country.” When the same question was asked three years ago, only 25 percent said government spying programs had gone too far.

In the space of three years there has been a shift of 20 percentage points in general public attitudes on spying and civil liberties. Again, the sentiment among younger Americans was even more pronounced, with 58 percent of 18-29-year-olds saying that spying programs had gone too far, and only 33 percent saying that they had not gone far enough.

There is no doubt that Snowden's revelations are a significant factor in this shift, underscoring the immense public service he has performed.

These results are all the more remarkable in that the questions posed, as is generally the case, presuppose the “war on terror” framework with which the ruling class has justified its assault on democratic rights. In fact, the spying programs revealed by Snowden are not “anti-terrorism policies,” but components of a vast apparatus directed against the population of the United States and the entire world.

The poll numbers underscore the reason these programs have been kept secret. It has nothing to do with “national security,” but rather with preventing the population from knowing what the government is doing. The political representatives of the ruling class are well aware that there is enormous popular opposition to the destruction of democratic rights.

The vast gulf between public sentiment and government policy is not unique to the United States. If a poll on whether or not to grant Snowden asylum were taken in any country in the world, there is little doubt as to the result. Yet the whistleblower finds himself

trapped on a planet without a visa.

Government after government has rejected his appeal for asylum. Supporters of Snowden, including WikiLeaks, have indicated that he will likely attempt to travel to Venezuela, which has indicated that it will grant him asylum. Even if he is able to make it there, however, his safety will be highly compromised.

All of the governments of Latin America, while using Snowden to bolster their anti-US credentials, are deeply committed to their relationship with the United States, which has threatened economic sanctions against any country that accepts Snowden. In particular, Venezuela's new president, Nicolas Maduro, has made clear his desire to improve ties with Washington.

The popular support for Snowden in the US finds no expression within the political establishment or mass media. The major newspapers turn their pages over to filth and lies, while doing what they can to bury or downplay the significance of what Snowden has revealed. As for the "left" supporters of the Democratic Party, such as the *Nation* magazine and the International Socialist Organization, they have largely kept their mouths shut, careful not to alienate their allies in the Obama administration.

There is a broader social and political process at work. For over a decade, the United States has been engaged in a series of wars, the systematic destruction of democratic rights, and a historically unprecedented transfer of wealth from the working class to the corporate and financial elite. Yesterday, the stock markets soared to new highs, the result of statements from Fed Chairman Ben Bernanke indicating that the endless supply of money funneled into the markets will continue indefinitely.

All of this has an impact on popular consciousness. The institutions of the state have lost credibility in the eyes of millions of people.

This general sentiment, however, must be translated into an active political movement. The social base for democratic rights is the working class, the vast majority of the population. A campaign to defend Snowden must be systematically developed in every section of the working class, connecting the defense of democratic rights with a struggle against the ruling class, its two political parties, and the capitalist profit system they defend.



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