

New York Times proposes clemency for Snowden: An exercise in damage control

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The statement released on New Year's Day by the editorial board of the *New York Times* calling for reduced punishment for Edward Snowden will be welcomed by many as a belated acknowledgment of the heroic work of the man who exposed the totalitarian operations of the National Security Agency (NSA). But the editorial inevitably draws attention to the *Times*' contribution to the vilification and persecution of Snowden in the aftermath of his initial revelations of secret government spying operations.

In the editorial, titled "Edward Snowden, Whistle-Blower," the *Times* requests that the Obama administration make a bargain with Edward Snowden, trading leniency for his return to the United States.

"When someone reveals that government officials have routinely and deliberately broken the law, that person should not face life in prison at the hands of the same government," the editorial reads, adding that "President Obama should tell his aides to begin finding a way to end Mr. Snowden's vilification and give him an incentive to return home."

On its surface, the editorial would seem to indicate a substantial turnaround in the position of the *Times*. The *Times* has played a central role in contributing to the climate that forced Snowden to flee the United States earlier this year. It is, in part, because of the loyalty of outfits like the *Times* to the Bush and Obama administrations that the responsibility for exposing the criminality at the highest levels of the US government falls to whistle-blowers like Edward Snowden, Julian Assange and Bradley Manning.

Far from defending Snowden, the *Times* has filled its pages with categorical denunciations of the young whistle-blower. Last June, when Snowden went public with the first leaks, the *Times*' response was unequivocally hostile. *Times* columnist David Brooks wrote that Snowden "betrayed the constitution" and declared that "the founding fathers did not create the United States so that some solitary 29-year-old could make unilateral decisions about what should be exposed."

In August, chief foreign affairs columnist Thomas Friedman opined: "[Snowden] dumped his data and fled to

countries that are hostile to us and to the very principles he espoused. To make a second impression [in Friedman's words, to prove he is "not a traitor"] Snowden would need to come home, make his case and face his accusers," despite the fact that Snowden would likely face "a lengthy jail term."

In a July television appearance, *Times* financial columnist and Wall Street toady Andrew Ross Sorkin said: "We've screwed this up, even letting [Snowden] get to Russia... I would arrest him, and now I would almost arrest Glenn Greenwald."

Bill Keller, the former *Times* executive editor who continues to oversee the alignment of the newspaper with the interests of the national security state, menacingly argued that a successful terrorist attack would require the US government to "ratchet up the security state, even beyond the war-on-terror excesses that followed the last big attack." Therefore, he concluded, civil libertarians would be advised to give the NSA plenty of leeway.

The *Times*' hostility to Edward Snowden followed the pattern established by the newspaper in its treatment of Julian Assange, who exposed, among other things, evidence of US war crimes in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In January 2011, Keller called Assange "an eccentric former computer hacker of Australian birth and no fixed residence," who was "elusive, manipulative and volatile," and who threw the media into "a state of information anarchy."

Seven months after Snowden identified himself as the NSA whistle-blower, what has accounted for the *Times*' change in tone?

First, the scale and staggering character of the content of Snowden's revelations have since been laid bare, exposing the architecture of a police state in the United States. The *Times* editorial, noting that "government officials have routinely and deliberately broken the law," enumerates some of the chilling constitutional violations perpetrated by the NSA.

The partial list includes criminal acts of breathtaking gravity: the "mass collection of phone and Internet data,"

the decoding of encryption systems, the breaking of communication links “allowing [the NSA] to spy on hundreds of millions of user accounts,” and the official agency practice of “repeatedly providing misleading information about its surveillance practices” to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court.

The editorial might also have noted that the US government tracks the physical movements of hundreds of millions of people worldwide; extracts and stores content from the phone conversations, text messages and emails of innocent civilians; spies on the leaders of foreign governments, including formal allies; and performs economic espionage on behalf of American corporations. The extent of the operations make clear that the purpose of the surveillance is not—as Obama administration officials claim—to fight the “global war on terror,” but rather is part of an effort to monitor and track innocent Americans in full violation of the Fourth Amendment of the US Constitution.

Second, the entire political establishment is now well aware of the vast chasm that exists between officially sanctified public opinion—of which the *Times* is a principle representative—and the sentiments of broad masses of people. Much to the chagrin of the Obama administration, the *Times* and the rest of the corporate media, the effort to whip up popular antagonism to Snowden has been rejected by the public.

That the apparent shift in the *Times*’ tone is part of an effort to limit public hostility to the political establishment is evidenced by the fact that the newspaper’s positive proposals are thoroughly ambiguous and ambivalent in terms of what Snowden’s fate would be were he to return to the United States. As David Firestone, a member of the editorial board, reminded readers on Thursday, the editorial board “didn’t say [Snowden] should be given a presidential pardon or a medal.”

Nor does the *Times* call for any major changes to be made to the surveillance programs. The *Times* editorial bemoans the “excesses” of the surveillance of the world population, but it wholly accepts the government’s justification for the build-up of the totalitarian apparatus.

“Many of the mass-collection programs Mr. Snowden exposed would work just as well if they were reduced in scope and brought under strict outside oversight, as the presidential panel recommended,” the editorial argues.

Though the editorial references the fact that Director of National Intelligence James Clapper is guilty of perjury, the *Times* merely notes that “there has been no discussion of punishment for that lie.”

The revelations made public by Edward Snowden have created an awareness amongst the American public of the advanced stage of decay of democratic norms. Snowden has

blown the cover off of a degree of government criminality unsurpassed in American history.

Revelation after revelation has discredited the agencies of the national security apparatus and shown how each of the three branches of American government—legislative, executive and judicial—is complicit in approving and rubber-stamping government spying on hundreds of millions of Americans, world leaders and international civilians.

He has exposed as lies the ideological pretenses of the “war on terror” and called into question the motives behind the dangerous antidemocratic shifts that have dirtied all aspects of political, social and cultural life in recent years. He has also exposed as lies the justifications provided by the staff of the *Times* and other media outlets for his own persecution.

There may also be a sense amongst some government officials that the information Snowden has yet to leak is so damaging that it would be best to bring him to the United States and “shut him up” in one way or another. The Obama administration, the *Times* and the entire political establishment are justifiably concerned about what is still to come.

The basic question posed by the revelations and the anxious response of the *Times* remains: from which layer of society will the constituency to defend the basic democratic rights enshrined in the US Constitution arise?

The fate of Edward Snowden depends entirely on the development of a working class movement in the United States and internationally to defend democratic rights.

In opposition to the efforts of the political establishment to protect and expand the national security state, the working class must put forward its own program and strategy to tear down the repressive apparatus of the US government and halt the attack on democratic rights. A mass political movement of the working class must be built to defend all social rights on the basis of a fight for genuine equality and for socialism.



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