

No Place to Hide: Glenn Greenwald's account of the Snowden revelations

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30 May 2014

No Place to Hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA and the US Surveillance State, by Glenn Greenwald, Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY, 2014.

This account of the revelations by former US intelligence agent and contractor Edward Snowden, and the significant role the author played in bringing them to the public, is a welcome antidote to the unceasing vilification of Snowden by US government officials and their apologists in the American corporate media.

It gives Greenwald's first-person account of how he was approached by Snowden, came to appreciate the significance of the material the former contractor possessed on the worldwide spying operations of the National Security Agency (NSA), and worked to make the story public, principally in articles for the *Guardian* (US), the American edition of the British daily newspaper.

Greenwald provides a succinct summary of the colossal scale of the NSA's efforts to monitor the electronic communications of the entire human race, summed up in the agency's motto "Collect it all." He makes an impassioned case for the right to privacy against the claims that pervasive surveillance of everyone's communications is necessary in the struggle against "terrorism." And he concludes with an indictment of the American corporate media as courtiers for the US ruling elite and its military-intelligence apparatus.

Four journalists played major roles in the production of the articles that brought the Snowden revelations to the world. First place, in Greenwald's account, goes to Laura Poitras, the documentary filmmaker who has been fighting US government harassment because of her unsparing exposés of the atrocities perpetrated in the US occupation of Iraq and the broader "war on terror."

Next is Greenwald himself, who came to Snowden's attention because of his vocal criticism of US government spying in columns written for the US online magazine *Salon* and then for the *Guardian* (US). He was actually the first journalist contacted by Snowden, but failed to take the steps required to receive his leaked documents, such as enabling encrypted email. Snowden then turned to Poitras, who, in turn, brought Greenwald on board.

Joining them, at the insistence of *Guardian* (US) editor Janine Gibson, was a veteran *Guardian* reporter with experience in national security stories, Ewen MacAskill. Poitras, Greenwald and MacAskill traveled to Hong Kong to make the first face-to-face contact with Snowden and receive his archive of documents, then wrote the *Guardian* stories that had such a powerful global impact last year.

The fourth contributor was Barton Gellman, a former national security reporter for the *Washington Post* who returned to work for that newspaper as a contractor. The *Post* and Gellman were brought in to provide backup for the *Guardian*, with Gellman and Poitras collaborating on several reports, most notably on PRISM, one of the most invasive NSA programs.

Greenwald briefly recounts Snowden's career in the intelligence services, which he joined after enlisting in the Army in 2004 and breaking

both legs in a training accident. With a flair for technology despite his lack of formal education, Snowden rose rapidly in IT work, first at the NSA, then at the CIA, working as a contractor, then as a full-time employee, systems administrator and, for three years, CIA cyber security expert stationed undercover in Geneva.

Snowden became disillusioned by the cynicism and ruthlessness of the CIA and left the agency in 2009. According to Greenwald, he had "hoped that the election of Barack Obama as president would reform some of the worst abuses he had seen." But no such change took place.

Snowden considered becoming a whistle-blower and made a number of career moves to further that goal. He switched agencies, going back to the NSA as a Dell contractor, working in Japan and gaining access to additional information on surveillance. He then worked for Dell at a CIA office in Maryland before transferring to an NSA facility in Hawaii. In early 2013, he applied for an NSA job with Booz Allen Hamilton because it would give him access to a further set of files he wanted to download and make public.

Greenwald details three aspects of Snowden's outlook that contributed to his decision to inform the people of the United States and the world of what the US intelligence apparatus was doing:

* *Individual responsibility*: Snowden told Greenwald that after recognizing that Obama was continuing the abuses he had seen under the Bush administration, "I realized then that I couldn't wait for a leader to fix these things. Leadership is about acting first and serving as an example for others, not waiting for others to act." (p. 43)

* *Valuing online freedom*: "As for many of his generation, 'the Internet' for him wasn't some isolated tool to use for discrete tasks. It was the world in which his mind and personality developed, a place unto itself that offered freedom, exploration, and the potential for intellectual growth. To Snowden, the unique qualities of the Internet were incomparably valuable, to be preserved at all costs." (p. 46)

* *Willingness to sacrifice*: Far from the alienated loner, acting out of frustration, Snowden "had a life filled with the things people view as most valuable. His decision to leak the documents meant giving up a long-term girlfriend that he loved, a life in the paradise of Hawaii, a supportive family, a stable career, a lucrative paycheck, a life ahead full of possibilities of every type." (p. 47)

Greenwald sums up Snowden in a striking passage that reflects genuine admiration for the courage and intelligence of this remarkable young man, who became the focus of worldwide media attention and a global manhunt by US intelligence agencies:

"Snowden seemed to derive a sense of strength from having made this decision. He exuded an extraordinary equanimity when talking about what the US government might do to him. The sight of this twenty-nine-year-old young man responding this way to the threat of decades, or life, in a super-max prison—a prospect that, by design, would scare almost anyone into paralysis—was deeply inspiring. And his courage was contagious: Laura and I vowed to each other repeatedly and to Snowden that every

action we would take and every decision we would make from that point forward would honor his choice.” (p. 51)

The drama in Greenwald’s account of the ten days in Hong Kong—his only face-to-face experience with Snowden—lies less in the interactions with the NSA leaker than with the struggle to get the story published in the *Guardian* and the *Post*. Both newspapers adhered to the practice of allowing the intelligence agencies to review the stories before they were published, thus subjecting editors to enormous pressure from both the government and their own corporate legal departments to curtail the exposures or suppress them altogether.

At one point, Greenwald says he was prepared to quit the *Guardian* and go elsewhere, or even begin publishing the revelations online himself, in the fashion of WikiLeaks. But he credits Janine Gibson, the editor of the newspaper’s US edition, with standing up to both legal and governmental browbeating, posting the first report online on June 5, 2013 under the headline, “NSA Collecting Phone Records of Millions of Verizon Customers Daily.”

A steady stream of revelations followed, with enormous repercussions throughout the world. The names of surveillance programs operated by the NSA became well known synonyms for police state spying: PRISM, X-KEYSCORE, BOUNDLESS INFORMANT, MUSCULAR, BLARNEY, STORMVIEW, PINWALE, to name a few.

The book includes a series of slides and screen captures that graphically display the scope and scale of NSA surveillance, as well as documenting the agency’s main collaborators in data collection: 80 US corporations, including all the major telecommunications and e-mail services providers; the governments of four English-speaking countries—Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand—which together with the US comprise the “Five Eyes” group; and dozens of other governments that provide access or information to US intelligence.

As Greenwald observes: “Taken in its entirety, the Snowden archive led to an ultimately simple conclusion: the US government had built a system that has as its goal the complete elimination of electronic privacy worldwide. Far from hyperbole, that is the literal, explicitly stated aim of the surveillance state: to collect, store, monitor, and analyze all electronic communication by all people around the globe.” (p. 94)

Greenwald maintains that this surveillance state is itself criminal in character. It is not a question of “rogue” operators within the NSA or other agencies who might “misuse” the vast databases assembled. Rather, the very existence of these databases is a crime against humanity.

He argues that “it is in the realm of privacy where creativity, dissent, and challenges to authority germinate.” He continues: “A society in which everyone knows they can be watched by the state—where the private realm is effectively eliminated—is one in which those attributes are lost, at both the societal and the individual level.” (p. 174)

Moreover, there is a social dimension to the buildup of domestic spying. “Worsening economic inequality, converted into a full-blown crisis by the financial collapse in 2008, has generated grave internal instability,” he writes. “There has been visible unrest even in relatively stable democracies, such as Spain and Greece. In 2011, there were days of rioting in London.” (p. 177)

Within the United States, the police state buildup is not simply a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The author traces the roots of the surveillance state back to the COINTELPRO operations by the FBI against political dissent in the 1960s and 1970s, which included massive infiltration of anti-war, black nationalist and socialist groups.

These activities were partially exposed in the Church Committee hearings in the mid-1970s, from which Greenwald drew the title of his book. Senator Frank Church, chairman of the committee, warned nearly 40 years ago that the technical powers of the NSA were so great that if they were turned inwards against the American people, there would be

“no place to hide.”

The book concludes with a direct attack on the American corporate media, which Greenwald characterizes, justifiably, in the most scathing terms. He recounts the campaign of political vituperation in the “mainstream” press after the Snowden revelations began, with many commentators—most notably David Gregory of NBC’s “Meet the Press”—suggesting that not only Snowden, but the journalists who worked with him, including Greenwald himself, should be prosecuted. Andrew Ross Sorkin, financial columnist for the *New York Times*, called for the arrest of both men.

Greenwald explores the hypocrisy of the media pundits, who readily provide a venue for officially sanctioned leaks—the “revelations” of the corporate-controlled press are usually nothing more than that—while denouncing “only those disclosures that displease or undermine the government.”

The very existence of the media as a “fourth estate” is conditioned on an adversarial relationship between the press and the powers-that-be, he maintains, adding, “Nobody needed the US Constitution to guarantee press freedom so that journalists could befriend, amplify, and glorify political leaders; the guarantee was necessary so that journalists could do the opposite.” (p. 230)

Before the Snowden revelations, the biggest exposure of domestic spying by the NSA came in a 2005 report in the *New York Times* by James Risen, detailing illegal wiretapping. But *Times* Executive Editor Bill Keller blocked publication of the report in 2004, before the presidential election, when it might have damaged the Bush administration, only allowing it to surface a year later, and even then, only after Risen threatened to take his material to a book publisher and denounce the *Times* for censorship.

Perhaps the most critical passage in this section is Greenwald’s description of the material basis for press collaboration with the surveillance state. He writes:

“This identification of the establishment media with the government is cemented by various factors, one of them being socioeconomic. Many of the influential journalists in the United States are now multimillionaires. They live in the same neighborhoods as the political figures and financial elites over which they ostensibly serve as watchdogs. They attend the same functions, they have the same circles of friends and associates, their children go to the same elite private schools...

“US establishment journalism is anything but an outside force. It is wholly integrated into the nation’s dominant political power. Culturally, emotionally, and socioeconomically, they are one and the same. Rich, famous, insider journalists do not want to subvert the status quo that so lavishly rewards them. Like all courtiers, they are eager to defend the system that vests them with their privileges and contemptuous of anyone who challenges the system. (p. 235)

There are significant limitations to Greenwald’s political perspective, expressed particularly in the epilogue, which hails the introduction of a bipartisan bill to defund the NSA surveillance programs, jointly introduced by liberal Democrat John Conyers and ultra-right Republican Justin Amash and narrowly defeated in the House of Representatives.

Greenwald is a small-d democrat, an opponent of mass spying and political repression, but not an opponent of capitalism. He makes a scathing denunciation of the role of money in corrupting US politics and the media, but recently launched an on-line media venture with the backing of Pierre Omidyar, the billionaire founder of eBay.

However aggressive his criticism of the existing order—and it is quite sharp in places—he remains shackled to a perspective of reforming that system through individual efforts to expose the worst evils and arouse public opinion. The development of a mass political movement from below, directed at uprooting the entire social order, seems for him to be a closed book.

That said, *No Place to Hide* is a serious contribution to the public understanding of the Snowden revelations and the emergence of a police state apparatus in America. It deserves a wide audience.



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