Oliver Stone’s Snowden: The NSA is “running a dragnet on the whole world”

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Directed by Oliver Stone; co-written by Stone and Kieran Fitzgerald

Veteran American filmmaker Oliver Stone, who has been directing since the mid-1980s, has made a movie about National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden. Snowden follows its titular character’s evolution from his enlistment in 2004 in the US Army Reserve as a Special Forces candidate, at which time he was a “patriot” and firm supporter of the war in Iraq, to his decision in 2013 to expose the NSA’s illegal efforts at universal surveillance.

Stone’s film is a serious effort and done with integrity. Snowden opened in North America on September 16, and will have been released in some 20 countries by the end of this week. That millions will watch a work offering a generally sympathetic portrait of Snowden, an individual denounced by the US government and media as a “traitor,” has considerable significance. It speaks to the immense (and growing) divide between official public opinion and the sentiments and opinions of wide layers of the population. Among young people in particular, Snowden is a highly admired figure.

The film opens in June 2013 in Hong Kong with the encounter between Snowden (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), now in hiding, documentary maker Laura Poitras (Melissa Leo) and radical journalist Glenn Greenwald (Zachary Quinto). They are soon joined by Ewen MacAskill (Tom Wilkinson) of the Guardian, who is planning—with some reluctance—to publish portions of Snowden’s cache of secret NSA documents. Poitras is shooting video for what will become the documentary Citizenfour (2014).

One of the most chilling sequences occurs in Hawaii, at the huge underground NSA complex known as “the tunnel,” whose specialty is spying on China. An army of technicians and operatives works around the clock with the most sophisticated equipment to monitor America’s economic and military rivals. This is the real face of international terrorism, the US military-intelligence apparatus as it gears up for global war. As O’Brien comments at one point, the “modern battle field” is “everywhere.”

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It is to Oliver Stone’s credit that he undertook to make Snowden. He clearly stuck his neck out for this. The director told Variety, “We got turned down with a good script, a good cast and a reasonable budget at every major studio. Studio heads said ‘Yes we like it. We’ll talk about it. There’s no problem here.’ It goes
upstairs, and a few days later nothing comes back.”

In an interview with Deadline Hollywood, Stone noted that it was difficult these days to make a film that was “critical of America.” Instead, he went on, “we’ve got bin Laden films [i.e., Zero Dark Thirty]. I think that’s the way it’s going. Everything, military. Everything, CIA. Look at Homeland. Look at 24. Look at all the Tom Clancy stuff. … I want to tell you how hard it was to get this movie made.”

Stone reportedly traveled to Russia and met with Snowden nine times. Gordon-Levitt (whose grandfather, film director Michael Gordon, was blacklisted in the 1950s) also visited Moscow and spoke with Snowden for several hours. In Snowden, in fact, the actor has gone beyond mere externals. Gordon-Levitt has grapsed something essential about Snowden’s principled character and the depth of his convictions. In addition, Ifans is especially sinister and Woodley, Schnetzer, Timothy Olyphant (as a CIA operative) and Scott Eastwood (as a mid-level NSA martinet) are also fine.

A strength of the film is that it eschews a phony “impartiality” and tells its story from Snowden’s standpoint. Quite rightly, it takes as its premise that his point of view—and growing horror—is shared by millions and millions of Americans and others around the globe.

Snowden continues to face the collective and potentially murderous hostility of the American state and its hangers-on. The film provides him with something of a voice. In that sense, it is high praise to suggest that Snowden deserves the vile and stupid (“Home-Grown Sedition”) and, in fact, the 9/11 attacks merely provided the occasion to put in place plans that had been prepared well in advance (and which also depended on the development of certain technologies). The very universality of the spying speaks to something systemic, to the profound fear felt by every ruling elite for its population at a time of profound economic and social crisis.

There are other, related issues. The Snowden-Mills romance is simply overdone and given too much weight in Snowden. No doubt Stone was trying both to humanize his subject in the eyes of the public and to show how much Snowden was prepared to sacrifice when he decided to turn against the intelligence community. Speaking of the future whistleblower at that crucial moment, the director noted. “Remember, at that point in time, he was giving her up, too. Let’s say you fall for this woman, and she’s 10 years in your life. … They’re going to have kids. He makes this decision and couldn’t even tell her.” Whatever the director’s intentions, the relationship too often gets in the way of more intriguing and telling matters.

That being said, Stone, co-scenarist Kieran Fitzgerald and the performers have brought to the screen, with some care and commitment, critical elements of Snowden’s story. Contained in this drama are some of the great issues of the day: above all, the danger of dictatorship and war.

And as for Snowden himself, Stone put it rather well to an interviewer: “For a 29-year-old boy to do what he did is pretty remarkable. I never could have done that. I don’t think you could have at that age.”

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