

Book Review: Edward Snowden – “Permanent Record”



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In 2013, twenty-nine year old Edward Joseph Snowden shocked the world when he broke with the American intelligence establishment and revealed that the US Government was secretly pursuing the means to collect information on every single telephone call, text message and email the world’s population was sending. The result would be an unprecedented system of mass surveillance with the ability to pry into the private lives of every person in the world. Snowden’s memoir, [“Permanent Record”](#) is the extraordinary story of how this bright young man became a spy, whistleblower, and exile—the Internet’s conscience.

Edward Snowden was born in Elizabeth City, NC and grew up within the shadow of Fort Meade, Maryland, the home of the National Security Agency (NSA) where he worked as a contractor to help develop the mass surveillance system that he ultimately exposed as a major danger to the world. During his seven-year combined stint for the CIA and then NSA, he participated in the most significant change in the history of American espionage—the change from the targeted surveillance of individuals to the mass surveillance of entire populations. The system he helped develop makes it technologically feasible to collect all the world’s digital communications, store them permanently, and search through them at will.

Technically, Snowden worked for the Dell Corporation while he developed systems for the NSA, but he was given a free hand and was treated as an independent and unsupervised contractor in his dealings with NSA. He designed a duplicate system to the primary one he developed for NSA Headquarters to assure

that if NSA's systems were inoperable or destroyed, a backup system would be available for use. Snowden physically developed this secondary system while on a tour of duty in Japan.

When Snowden returned to the US from Japan at age 28, he was placed in charge of a Dell technical liaison team that worked with the technical divisions of the CIA in order to design and promote systems solutions to any problems "The Agency" could imagine. Snowden's team developed the now famous "Cloud" computing architecture which enables any agent, no matter where physically located, to access and search any data they need, no matter the distance.

In sum, Snowden's job of managing and connecting the flow of intelligence gave way to developing methodology to store it forever and to make the system universally available and searchable. These projects came together for Snowden in Hawaii, where he moved to work on a new contract with NSA at the age of 29. Up to then he had been laboring on individual projects on a "Need-To-Know" basis, unable to understand the cumulative purpose behind his specialized, compartmentalized tasks. He came to understand how all his work fit together to form a system of global mass surveillance. He performed the work of integrating all the systems he had developed deep in a tunnel in a sort of subterranean Pearl Harbor in HI. Three hundred twenty million American citizens were thus being surveilled in gross contravention of the Constitution of the United States and the basic values of any free society.

"Permanent Record" reveals how Snowden amassed documents that provided evidence of the US Government's lawbreaking and turned them over to journalists, who vetted and published them to a scandalized world. The book recounts the series of events that led up to Snowden's decision to reveal the nature of the system he developed, the moral and ethical principles that influenced his decision, and the evolution of those moral and ethical principles.

In the early stage of the Internet age, few realized that the personal information that was shared among people was being gathered and sold in secret, becoming a prominent commercial product of the E-Commerce world. The feeling of personal privacy violation was slow to be realized by many people. Aside from log-in and financial transactions, hardly any

online communications were encrypted in the early 2000's, which meant that in many cases, governments did not need to obtain any approvals from companies in order to determine what their customers were doing or capture their personal data. They could just spy on the world without telling a soul. The US Government fell victim to the temptation to collect personal information, which became an unrelenting fever. "Absolute power corrupts absolutely", said British philosopher Lord Acton. The system of near-universal surveillance was set up by the Government without our consent, and in a manner that deliberately hid every aspect of its programs from our knowledge. To reveal any basic fact about this system was to invite severe penalties including a life sentence in a federal prison cell.

Edward Snowden came to realize he was a party to his country's abuses of its powers and came to feel that disclosing the extent of those abuses to journalists would not be advocating for anything radical, such as destruction of the Government. He felt he would be advancing the nation's stated ideals. Privacy is just a modern-day form of "liberty" that came into its own with the Internet revolution.

It has been six years since Snowden revealed to the world what the NSA was up to. ["Permanent Record"](#) is a revealing memoir that outlines a major illegitimate Government activity while providing an interesting, well-written biography of a major player in national affairs.

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