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Edward J. Snowden: Hero or Villain?

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· **Summary** ·

This paper discusses whether Edward J. Snowden can be considered a modern-day hero or a villain and whether such attribution is useful or not. The author presents the argument that Snowden is more hero than villain but that there are good reasons why he should not be considered a hero, including impermissible degrees of simplification and the dangers of folklore. This paper also engages in finding reasons as to why Edward Snowden may be a theoretical but no real hero; these reasons include the inconvenient truth of absent popular concern about illegitimate government practices. Widespread criticism of Snowden by government officials and concerned individuals is analyzed and essentially refuted.

It is possible to interpret Snowden's actions as a metaphor for the evils of sprawling government power in other areas. It is discussed whether the classification of Snowden as a modern-day hero is useful in this context given the fact that many classic heroes like Robin Hood have undergone a vast change of contextual and emotional reception.

This paper concludes that Edward Snowden can, but should not be considered a hero due to several constraining factors. The author wishes that Edward Snowden becomes an inspiration to us all so that we all can become a little bit more like him, but without glorifying him.

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Part I

The Premise

1 Who is Edward Snowden?

Edward Joseph Snowden is an American whistleblower and former U.S. government employee. He leaked secret information about global mass surveillance programs in June 2013. To escape criminal prosecution in the United States, he fled to Hong Kong and subsequently to Russia. He was later granted asylum in Russia.

The reception of Snowden's revelations has been controversial. Various sources hail him as a hero, a martyr, a villain and a traitor.

The documents that were leaked by Snowden present a world in which nearly every digital piece of communication can be intercepted and recorded by the United States government, often with the knowledge of service providers. It was also revealed that the National Security Agency (NSA) is capable of breaking specific encryption algorithms and has attack vectors for other kinds of encryption.

2 Heroes and Villains

What is a hero? What is a villain? To strengthen this analysis and to emphasize its main points, the author has chosen to apply common definitions of heroes and villains. These definitions start with a simple premise and are then critically reflected and amended throughout the course of the praxeological argument presented in this paper.

hero: someone who displays great courage and self-sacrifice to achieve a specific good cause;

villain: someone whose main objective is to do evil.

It is practically impossible to offer definitions that are acceptable for everyone. Nevertheless, the author believes that the definitions chosen are usual and self-explanatory.

Part II

The Classification

3 Definitely no Villain

It is of vast importance to note that Edward Snowden is no villain. However, there are primarily two groups of people that regard his activity as a disservice to the world: government officials and citizens that are scared of freshly ensuing terrorism.

In addressing these two groups I want to demonstrate that their criticism is not valid, and that because of this invalidity, Edward Snowden is not a villainous person.

It must be assumed that government officials that regard Snowden's revelations as wrong do so only because of their own status in the state system. Under which moral position could it possibly be argued that Snowden's activities are villainous? The government could argue that because of Snowden's revelations, it is now harder to prevent terrorism due to terrorists resorting to encryption or other methods of secure interaction. This argument is intuitively true. But there is a hidden premise that is embedded in this argument: The argument is premised on the belief that *before Snowden's revelations* the government

1. succeeded in preventing terrorism
2. because of insecure ways of communication among terrorists.

Neither the second nor any combination of these premises is demonstrably valid. In fact, there is not a *single* instance of actual domestic or foreign terrorism that was provably prevented by the means of global mass telecommunication surveillance. To lessen the requirements, the government would then argue that it did not *prevent* terrorist acts, but it used surveillance to *identify* suspected terrorists that participated in such acts. That is a demonstrably true claim. But the claim is only true in regard to the *normal course of surveillance in law enforcement*, not global mass surveillance. Edward Snowden did not reveal that law enforcement agencies may intercept phone calls in specific instances or that public places in the United States are extensively videotaped. He revealed *global mass surveillance programs* of a new magnitude. Interestingly enough, they did not help: To cite an example, the suspected perpetrators behind the Boston Marathon bombing were identified through means of ordinary surveillance and public information gathering. These methods seem weirdly old-fashioned compared to global mass surveillance and yet they are amongst the only known instances where surveillance (in a general sense) was successful. *Global mass surveillance has never been demonstrably successful in fighting terrorism.* The claim that mass surveillance is helpful in combating terrorism has to be dismissed as not proven.

Intelligence agencies have in the past always derived their information about suspected terrorists from public sources and insiders. That a suspected terror cell could be legitimately surveilled is beyond debate, but it has neither been provably successful nor is it acceptable to intercept all kinds and sources of communication without clear pursuit of a certain person or group of persons.

The government is guilty of global mass surveillance without being able to demonstrate particular success. Additionally, it should be mentioned that the Macchiavellian notion of the end justifying the means is morally bankrupt – even if the government had any merit whatsoever in using global mass surveillance to combat terrorism, the question whether it would be *intrinsically moral* to surveil billions of completely innocent people would still be left unanswered.

The second main group of people that dismiss Snowden's activities are citizens that are afraid of terrorism. This fear is certainly understandable, but it is not reasonable. The chance

of being killed in a terrorist act as an American are about 1 in 20 million [3]. Arguments against this matter of fact are based on the rationale that compared to other methods of dying, terrorism is *intentional, malicious and directed against a group of people because of hatred*. This argument is a classic *non sequitur* fallacy because there is no connection between the intention of death and death: In the end, death means that a person dies, irrespective of the intentions of the perpetrating agent. It is not rational to philosophize about the intentions of perpetrators when their intentions do not change the odds of me randomly becoming their victim. As such, the comparison of terroristic acts to being struck by a lightning or dying in a car accident is perfectly valid — in spite of their ontological differences, the aforementioned events are stochastic processes — and it follows that the average citizen does not have to be greatly concerned about becoming a victim of a terroristic act.

Collective panic does not undermine Snowden’s revelations. Additionally, for the populist argument to be valid, it would be necessary to show that the number of terrorist acts will increase *because of Snowden’s activities*. It is unclear how such a proof should be acquired and why terrorists would now be more eager to perform acts of violence because of Edward Snowden’s revelations. It is completely beyond reason to assume an increase of terrorist acts *because of Edward Snowden*.

These two main views of Snowden’s activities account for the vast majority of domestic criticism. Other criticism, like that Snowden is a traitor who acted against his national duty, that he endangered United States soldiers in foreign countries or that he broke his employment contract do not only lack moral and philosophical rigor but they are either demonstrably false or they confuse external, ethical assessment with legality issues. Moreover, they are also held by comparatively few people.

The addressed notions are inextricably linked with the belief that Edward Snowden is a “villain”. By showing that these notions are invalid and their criticism is null and void, it must be accepted that Edward Snowden is not doing evil and thus certainly is not a villain.

4 But Is He a Hero?

A hero must at least display courage and sacrifice for a greater good. Edward Snowden planned his escape from the United States meticulously: He knew that transiting via Hong Kong was safe because the People’s Republic of China could not (legally) intervene in this special jurisdiction and because there was no extradition treaty with the United States. He then chose Russia as a destination but it was not clear whether the Russian government would grant Snowden asylum or deport him. This Hollywood-style stunt alone exemplifies that Snowden was anticipating a relentless use of force that would come to him following his leaks. It is needless to say that his escape alone would not have been possible without a tremendous amount of courage.

Edward Snowden has criticized [1] that people restrict their right to free speech because they fear governmental intimidation like “ending up on ‘the list’”. By exposing the drastic measures implemented by the United States government he wants to showcase the immense

apparatus of technical abilities and challenge the definitive American assumption of living in the *Land of the Free, Home of the Brave*. By listening to Snowden's arguments, it becomes evident that he wants to help *restore* a past true freedom that has been lost in the proclaimed battle against terrorism. This symbolic fight for freedom is Snowden's greater good in which he can be seen as the main protagonist that sacrifices everything: in that sense alone, he is a classic, almost stereotypically genuine hero.

But courage and the display of a greater good alone do not make a hero. It is necessary to provide self-sacrifice — that is, to prove the seriousness of one's deeds. Nobody can be assumed to be a hero if not some kind of *unrecoverable personal investment* into the greater good is publicly proven. If this personal investment (the sacrifice) does not succeed, the hero-to-be can be rightfully accused of merely auto-congratulatory, i.e. spurious or insincere commitment. The hero-to-be has to provide a self-sacrifice that is

- a) highly valued in the eyes of the public and
- b) of less value to the hero-to-be than the achievement of the proclaimed greater good, while
- c) the process of achieving the proclaimed greater good is generally of less value to the public than the self-sacrifice.

Does Edward Snowden satisfy these requirements? He does obviously fulfill the first two: Snowden sacrificed his personal freedom, his highly salaried position, his significant other and his home on Hawai'i for the achievement of creating awareness for global mass surveillance practices. What he sacrificed is highly valued in the Western hemisphere and what he sacrificed it for is *nevertheless* worth more to him, because otherwise he would not have done it.

Does he fulfill the third requirement? It must be assumed that he does — based merely on the fact that there are so few whistleblowers compared to the vast amount of people working in high-security facilities. All those people (the non-whistleblowers) *value their own lifestyle higher than Snowden's proclaimed greater good*. To them, exposing the truth is not desirable enough to sacrifice their livelihood. Only those parts of the public can be included in the comparison that would have the *practical possibility* to proceed similarly to Snowden.

If we apply the textbook definition that was presented in Part I, we must inevitably conclude that Edward Snowden is a hero. In the following, it should be expanded on the thesis that imagining Edward Snowden as a hero is problematic and not useful.

5 The Special One

People should be judged by their merits, not by their status. To heroize Snowden implies to assign the label “hero, checked and approved” to him and to incorporate his person into the perpetual culture sphere.

To wish the heroization of Edward Snowden means to wish the abundance of Edward Snowden. But what is abundant is not special. It is deeply embedded in human nature to react to *changes* only. If Snowden was to become as abundant as surveillance, his new revelations would not be greatly noticed — just like surveillance itself. But what Snowden revealed must be exposed and viewed with full attention. Heroes, on the other hand, are in fact *deferred* to the cultural background.¹

6 The Unvillifiable

Western governments typically enjoy a high degree of *a priori trust* amongst their populace. The promise of freedom and democracy ignites the collective illusion that *everyone rules*, not just a powerful oligarchy. Additionally, most people had to undergo early compulsory state education that is not exactly critical to the expansion of government power. Thus, even unpopular measures are often deemed to have *good intentions* or are just done *the wrong way* — that means, they can be fixed. This is supported by the simple fact that there have been no major uprisings leading to revolution in Western democracies since the end of World War II. In practice, governmental withdrawals at the fictional *People's Bank of the Benefit of the Doubt* are virtually unlimited.

As such, every change to the status quo must defend itself. There is, of course, no reason to assume that the status quo is legitimate. But as stated earlier, the human mind reacts to *changes* — and to change is not always comfortable, especially if the fantasy of the *Land of the Free, Home of the Brave*, id est a *paradise of democracy and freedom* is questioned.

Labels such as “hero” or “villain” invite refractory reactions that are purely based on emotion. A hero can be dismissed a priori simply because he is not deemed to be a hero by an individual, without having to address the hero’s actual deeds. Heroes are either loved or hated — there is no middle ground. Heroes are practically always the target of caricaturization to the point of complete distortion. This trivialization leads to the emergence of prefabricated opinions. The concept of a heroic Edward Snowden is, in essence, *preaching to the choir* — the choir of people that are already convinced that the government overstepped its boundaries will sing happily to whom they see as hero. From an objective point of view, this is completely useless: Nobody can be expected to change their opinion based on the mere existence of an at least partially popular hero. Only facts and good argumentation can change the reasonable man’s opinion — and heroes do not tend to inspire rational, mindful analyses. This is even more valid in this case as the topic discussed already is extremely emotionally loaded.

The heroization of Edward Snowden does not provide any useful momentum in the debate about global mass surveillance programs. It just hardens the fronts and trivializes his serious revelations.

¹Unfortunately, Edward Snowden has already initiated this inevitable process of decay by letting journalists publish small new pieces of leaks every other week. It would have been more influential to publish the whole bulk of documents at once or to choose a less frequent method of publication with a careful selection of more serious revelations. This can be seen as proof that ubiquitous appearance ultimately leads to irrelevance and that this irrelevance extends to the agent’s possibly heroic deeds, not just his own self, id est his personality.

7 The Case against Folklore

The previous section addressed the short-term implications of potential Snowdenian heroization. But not only in the short, but also precisely in the middle and long term, the introduction of a new hero with the name of Edward Snowden is harmful.

The popular image of a hero tends to develop a life of its own. As new generations emerge, people come into existence that did not experience Snowden's revelations by themselves and as such do not intuitively understand their significance. After all, new generations will *already grow up* with global mass surveillance and the rule that the human mind reacts to *changes* only applies to them as well.

As the story of the hero Snowden would be passed down by tales of the elderly lectured to the young, the real-life person of Edward Snowden would lose its plasticity and its *humanness*. To establish a hero means to effectively *dehumanize* the person to create a quasi-mystic figure that is remembered for itself and not for its actual, real deeds. Thus, the deeds themselves would become a shallow hull of their far-reaching substance.

It is completely legitimate to ask if, and how, the non-heroization of Snowden could bypass these problems. It is even necessary to demand a better outcome in the case of non-heroization. Most importantly, non-heroization means a thematic decoupling from the agent. If future generations would want to learn about the harsh reality of mass surveillance, they would have to request their sources for factual information about historical events. At first glance, this request seems to imply additional overhead because the common knowledge of a hero that unveiled global mass surveillance programs would, per definition, not be available. But it is completely crystal clear that this "extra step" means *direct access* to the facts of Snowden's revelations, whereas the heroic tales would likely never lead to any further inquiry. Hence, it can be assumed that only non-heroization inspires genuine interest in further generations.

To not heroize Edward Snowden also means to preserve his humanness. The fact that Edward Snowden was a non-privileged „normal person“ from society may be inspiring to future whistleblowers.

The longstanding hero Robin Hood exemplifies this trivialization and caricaturization: Robin Hood was in fact a tax revolter. By stealing from the rich, he stole from the *government* because in Robin Hood's time, the only rich men were men of the government or the church. Hood's arch nemesis, the Sheriff of Nottingham (who is killed several times by Hood) is obviously a man of the government. The same applies to the nobility — except the king — that is the other main Hoodian counterparty besides the Sheriff. They acquired their very wealth by confiscating the land and property of their peasants; and the stories of Robin Hood tell the history of him repossessing it and giving it back to the original proprietors. Robin Hood was an early libertarian hero — and yet, he is remembered as "stealing from the rich" — a basically correct statement, but one that is tremendously misleading without mention of the historical context. A modern-day Robin Hood would not steal from the capitalists. He would precisely steal from the *big government* officials and their kleptocratic friends in the marketplace that still exist and prosper today. Yet, this part of the Robin Hood story is strangely unremembered. It is reasonable to assume that this process of complete distortion

and decontextualization is compulsory and inevitable for every popular hero.

Thus, the idea of heroizing Edward Snowden should be rejected in its entirety. It may be tempting to conceptualize Snowden as a hero, but heroizing him would undermine his achievements and make him the object of folklore, when in fact what he showed the world should be observed with full seriousness.

Part III

The Reality

8 No Hero Without Democratic Sanction

The textbook definition of a hero is undoubtedly fulfilled by Edward Snowden. The author presented arguments on how it is not a good idea to see Snowden as a hero and yet there is another important aspect as to why Edward Snowden may *not* be a hero after all.

It shall be noted that there is no such thing as an “academic hero”. It does not make any sense to sit down at a table and create a checklist of what may or may not constitute the heroism in Edward Snowden. A *real hero*, a hero in the actual sense is always a hero that has democratic sanction, i.e. someone who is commonly thought to be a hero. *A hero requires collective sanction.*

But it is precisely because of that democratic sanction — or, rather, the lack thereof — that Edward Snowden is not a hero. It is a sad truth that what Snowden exposed has not lead to any significant outrage because the populace does not only feel their own impuissance but also because the populace just does not care enough. Global mass surveillance is just not nuisance enough to cause uproar. This is very dangerous and everybody should be advised to secure themselves from the ever-growing *Lernaean Hydra* of mass surveillance, but it is also clear that most people are not actually interested in protecting their privacy, be it because they “have nothing to hide” or because alternative solutions are too difficult for them. Snowden’s revelations lead to some progress in the area of secure communication [2]. The author believes that end users expect their service and software providers to accompany them with a degree of genuine security, but they are not yet willing to use it manually. The trade-off between using end-to-end encryption or being spied on seems to be in favor of being spied on. This should serve as a signal that existing secure means of communication are not easy enough to use yet.

Thus, the most important part of heroism is missing: democratic sanction. Edward Snowden may be considered a hero in every theoretical way possible, but he is by no means a *de facto* hero.

9 Parallels

Edward Snowden's revelations and their aftermath can also be interpreted as a symbol for other cases of government overreach.

The issue of central banking is such an example. Central banks distort the market by injecting huge amounts of cheap, newly created money into it. They circumvent the market mechanism by setting arbitrary interest rates that are of course useful to perpetuate the issuance of governmental debt and thus the foreseeable enslavement of future generations. Markets are just expressions of individual preferences; and if markets are manipulated, preferences become misguided. Who shows their disrespect for the expression of preferences by means of a free market is not the savior of the economy but an ordinary criminal – no better than the criminal that is counterfeiting money in his basement. However, it should be noted that the counterfeiter's influence on the economy is marginal and nearly non-existent, whereas the central bank's influence is so decisive and tyrannical that it can determine the fate of the world economy. Nevertheless, the counterfeiter could be jailed for decades, while the central banker would, in the case of failure, simply put all blame on the capitalist system and call for even more government intervention.

Unfortunately, the wrongdoings of central banks have, until now, had about the same aftermath like Snowden's revelations: nearly none. On one hand, too few people understand the wide range of powers that central banks have and on the other hand, it is too easy to blame capitalism for things that are, in reality, completely anti-market and anti-capitalist like the concept of modern central banking.

Part IV

The Conclusion

Edward J. Snowden is no villain. But is he a hero? This paper showed that classifying Snowden as a hero may be tempting, but that it is not only untrue in respect to the obligatory democratic sanction of heroes-to-be but that it is also profoundly counterproductive. To classify him as a heroic entity must inevitably lead to the rise of folklore and the fall of mental occupation with what he exposed. It is important to draw parallels with other areas in which there exists an ethical divergence of rights: If my neighbor must not spy on me, but I allow my state to do it, am I not mistaken in my judgment? If I may not print money in my basement, why is the central bank allowed to do it?

The concept of heroes is, in essence, a populist compression of information. To view someone as a hero is not only a great trivialization of their underlying highly complex personality but also a presentation of disrespect: a hero is remembered for being a hero and not remembered for what he actually did. The tragic example of the classic hero Robin Hood exemplifies this divergence between perceived and actual truth; because even if some breadcrumbs of actual behaviour are remembered, these breadcrumbs are often warped and have

lost their context. What Snowden exposed should be viewed with full sincerity. It should be asked whether what Snowden exposed is maybe just a piece in the puzzle of illegitimate governmental power. But to assume that conferring the title of a hero on him is useful is nothing but a falsis principiis proficisci.

10 No Hero, but an Inspiration

Edward Snowden's sacrifice for what he perceives to be a greater good is certainly outstanding. As the author has shown in this paper, Snowden should not be considered a hero for several important reasons. The author wants to close this entry to the 8th International Vernon Smith Prize by stating that he perceives Edward Snowden's deeds to be very positively influential: In exposing illegitimate global mass surveillance, he has proven himself not only to be a defender of liberty but also a staunch advocate of personal integrity.

It is therefore the author's wish for the future that we all become a bit more like Edward Snowden — that we do not accept the overwhelming state apparatus and that we personally, as far as that is possible, expose the historic injustices that are directly linked to it. This includes many distinct areas, like crony capitalism, police violence, unjust taxation and central banking. All these effects are just symptoms of the same illness that is “big government”.

Edward Snowden should not be considered a hero, but he should be considered an inspiration to us all. But in this process, what he did has to be viewed with the highest level of sincerity and with the earnest understanding that mass surveillance is just one, but maybe — thanks to Snowden — the most visible aspect of state power getting out of hand.

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