



## Is search for Snowden turning into sideshow?

By Sharon Cohen – June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013

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Edward Snowden's continent-jumping, hide-and-seek game seems like the stuff of a pulp thriller — a desperate man's drama played out before a worldwide audience trying to decide if he's a hero or a villain.

But the search for the former National Security Agency contractor who spilled U.S. secrets has become something of a distracting sideshow, some say, overshadowing the important debate over the government's power to seize the phone and Internet records of millions of Americans to help in the fight against terrorism.

"You have to be humble on Day 1 to say, 'This isn't about me. This is about the information.'... I don't think he really anticipated the importance of making sure the focus initially was off him," says Mike Paul, president of MGP & Associates PR, a crisis management firm in New York. "Not only has he weakened his case, some would go as far as to say he's gone from hero to zero."

Snowden, he says, can get back on track by "utilizing whatever information he has like big bombs in a campaign," so the focus returns to the question of spying and not his life on the run.

Snowden's disclosures about U.S. surveillance to The Guardian newspaper and The Washington Post have created an uproar in Washington that shows no signs of fading.

A petition asking President Barack Obama to pardon Snowden has collected more than 123,000 signatures.

But the head of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., meanwhile, has called Snowden's disclosure of top-secret information "an act of treason." House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, is among those who've called Snowden a "traitor."

The president has dismissed the 30-year-old Snowden as a "hacker" and he had pledged that the U.S. won't be scrambling military jets to snatch Snowden and return him to the U.S., where he faces espionage charges.

Snowden is possibly holed up in the wing of a Russian airport hotel reserved for travelers in transit who don't have visas to enter Russia. He might be waiting to hear whether Ecuador,

Iceland or another country might grant him asylum. He fled Hong Kong last weekend after being charged with violating American espionage laws.

Some say Snowden is losing ground in the battle for public opinion by cloaking his travels in secrecy, creating more interest in his efforts to elude U.S. authorities than his allegations against the government.

By disappearing in Russia, he loses "access to rehabilitate himself in the public's mind," says William Weaver, a professor at the University of Texas at El Paso who has written about government secrecy.

"You have to keep selling yourself, if you will, and do it in a smart way so people don't get tired of you. ... His only hope was to hit a grand slam home run with the public and make it stick. For every hour that he's not doing something like that, he's in trouble."

Others say Snowden's personality is irrelevant and doesn't change his major argument — that U.S. intelligence agencies have lied about the scope of its surveillance of Americans.

Gene Healy, a vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute, recently wrote an essay denouncing pundits who've labeled Snowden a "grandiose narcissist" and a "total slacker." He maintains that the former contractor's revelations are all that matters. "The content of the message is far more important than the character of the messenger," he wrote in the *Washington Examiner*.

Healy said "the most disturbing" part of Snowden's disclosures was the massive amounts of data collected on citizens. "The potential abuse of that information represents a grave threat to American liberty and privacy regardless of Snowden's character and motivations," he wrote.

David Colapinto, general counsel at the National Whistleblowers Center, says it's not surprising Snowden has become an "easy target" facing harsh criticism from those at the highest levels of government — people "who have a bigger megaphone than he does."

"The name-calling and whatever may happen in the future — we don't know what he's going to do," he adds. "We don't know what the government is going to do. ... It's pretty hard to pull out a crystal ball."

So far, America seems to be divided, according to polls taken in the first days after Snowden's leak of top-secret documents. Many people initially applauded the former contractor for exposing what they saw as government spying on ordinary Americans. Since then, though, government officials have responded with explanations of the program and congressional testimony attesting to the value of surveillance in thwarting terrorist attacks.

In one poll, a June 12-16 national survey by the Pew Research Center and USA Today, 49 percent of those surveyed said the release of classified information about the NSA program serves the public interest, while 44 percent found it harmful. For those under 30, the gap was dramatically larger. That group said it's good for the public by a 60-34 percent margin, according to the survey.

Still, 54 percent also said the government should pursue a criminal case against someone who leaked classified information about the program.

A second survey taken in that same five-day period found a similar split. The Washington Post-ABC news poll found that 43 percent support and 48 percent oppose criminally charging Snowden. But the survey also reported that 58 percent of Americans support the NSA's sweeping surveillance program.

Snowden has acknowledged taking highly classified documents about U.S. surveillance and sharing the information with the papers in Britain and Washington. He also told the South China Morning Post that the NSA hacked Chinese cellphone companies to seek text message data.

At this point, Snowden's main job is to stay out of prison and he has both a "powerful narrative" and major disadvantages, says Eric Dezenhall, head of a crisis management firm in Washington.

"The biggest thing on the asset side is the concern people have about government surveillance — it's very legitimate," Dezenhall says. "The weaknesses are having betrayed secrets he was entrusted with and the fact he ended up in these hostile countries. .... Public opinion doesn't move on nuance. (People think) You're a whistle-blower who's in Russia or China. So you think they have an answer to this problem? It's not very intelligent."

Gerald R. Shuster, a professor of political communication at the University of Pittsburgh, says if Snowden had remained in the U.S. and "stood his ground, he would have remained more heroic" and lawyers would have lined up to represent him.

But if he's brought back to face charges and "he's shown in handcuffs, the aura of idealism is over," Shuster says. "He's more and more perceived as a criminal."

Colapinto, the lawyer for the whistle-blower group, says it's too soon to know how Snowden's plight will play out.

"This is like a moving river," he says. "We're maybe midstream. We don't know where this will end up. I think history will judge him as things develop. But we just don't know the end of the story."