

# Forbes

## The Economics Of Edward Snowden, Laura Poitras's 'Citizenfour'

By [John Tamny](#)

November 12, 2014

*“But I don’t think of you.” – Howard Roark, The Fountainhead*

Without minimizing the countless human rights abuses that Cuban dictator Fidel Castro visited on his own people, Cato Institute senior fellow Bandow has long argued that neither Castro nor Cuba ever represented a military threat to the United States. Yet in constantly demonizing the Cuban dictator, top American foreign policy officials needlessly elevated an individual who would have quickly slipped into irrelevancy had the American political and foreign policy establishment simply ignored him.

Castro’s highly valuable global currency, currency that made him the darling of the portion of the global ruling elite known to look askance at the U.S., was the United States’ dislike of him. Absent the attention bestowed on Castro by the world’s richest and most powerful country, it’s not a reach to assume that even the old Soviet Union’s leaders would have dismissed Cuba’s dictator. “But the United States doesn’t think of you” perhaps could have saved us from the botched Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban missile crisis, and lots of time wasted since.

Watching the lengthy interview of Edward Snowden in [Citizenfour](#), Laura Poitras’s highly regarded documentary, thoughts of Castro regularly entered my mind. In Snowden’s case, the question I kept asking was why the U.S. political class needlessly demonized such a mediocrity. Why didn’t Republicans, Democrats and President Obama simply say “But Mr. Snowden, we don’t think of you.”

To watch *Citizenfour* is to witness an overly paranoid crank. Snowden went through all sorts of hurdles to contact the documentarian in Poitras without being detected by U.S. intelligence, clearly traveled to Hong Kong (where Poitras and *Guardian* reporter Glenn Greenwald interviewed him) under deep cover, but not explained enough was why? It’s entirely possible that Snowden’s every action was being tracked ahead of him becoming a national news story, but the idea seems far-fetched.

Viewers of *Citizenfour* are treated to Snowden logging onto one of his computers, but doing so with a red pillowcase over his head so fearful was he of exposure. When he did this the camera turned to a bemused Greenwald... This viewer muttered, “We took this nut seriously?”

Up front, it should be said that any NSA-sponsored spying on the citizenry of the U.S. is an affront to a free society, and that the NSA's actions unearthed by Snowden are shameful. No doubt it's the federal government's constitutional obligation to maintain a common defense meant to protect us from foreign intruders, but sometimes governments cross the line.

It's often pointed out that "war is the health of the state", and the NSA's actions whereby the U.S. intelligence agency tracked the communications of U.S. citizens without regard to their role in terrorist activities gave life to the famous saying. Government is ultimately paralysis, errors by those in government have killed far more people than terrorists ever have, so it's reasonable to say that Snowden did all Americans a favor when he exposed the doings of the NSA through Poitras and Greenwald.

Debates will continue about how much the NSA's actions amount to overreach on the part of the feds, but at the very least it should be asked how much liberty we're willing to give up for the false security offered by our federal government? Indeed, leaving aside the constitutionality of the NSA's doings, do readers truly feel safer from a terrorist attack thanks to the NSA's spying activities?

To answer in the affirmative would be a reach if looked at through an economic lens. As Snowden makes plain in the *Citizenfour* interviews, the NSA was tracking voluminous amounts of U.S. communications in its efforts to unearth existing or looming terrorist activities. Defenders of the NSA would say its analysts were merely looking for patterns without listening in on specific conversations, but assuming the latter is true, does anyone really think the NSA's analysts are in possession of otherworldly skills that would enable them to find the proverbial needle in the haystack based on Google searches, calls on Verizon, e-mails, etc.?

Economic logic dictates that an answer of yes to the above is quite the stretch. Anyone able to detect actionable patterns based on multitudinous communications presumably possesses incomparable skills that would rate enormous pay in the private sector. In particular, someone with this kind of mind for numbers or patterns would logically be an attractive addition to hedge funds ever in search of an information edge that reveals itself through higher returns.

It's shooting fish in a very crowded barrel to mock the incompetence that so often defines government, but since there's truth in all stereotypes, does anyone really believe that the NSA is the exception to the general rule? Do they once again want to believe that someone with an amazing head for numbers would toil for the relatively meager pay that defines government work? Even if one were to answer yes to the previous questions, simple logic dictates that more often than not NSA experts would fail when it comes to stopping terrorists before a strike.

Back to Snowden, much more informed minds can debate what kind of fate should be his assuming he's ever apprehended by U.S. authorities. Compelling arguments have come from both sides.

But from watching the documentary, one argument not prominently made so far is that President Obama and the political class should be angry with Snowden not so much for exposing the NSA's spying activities as they should be horrified for the world to learn how very unfocused the

NSA's approach has become. Tracking trillions of communications signals a lack of a strategy, not a serious one meant to find those who mean us harm. To gather trillions of internet searches, e-mails and calls is to gather none. It's presumably impossible to unearth actionable items amid all the information gathered.

In this case, and perhaps others, the Obama administration and Congress would have done better had they admitted to the NSA searches all the while laughing off any interest in Snowden himself. That they made him an enemy was for the federal government to elevate a charitably average person, all the while acknowledging how haphazard has been the search for wrongdoers in the first place.

The response to Snowden should have been "We don't think of you", all the while calling for a cessation of spying on the citizenry that logically can't work very consistently as is. *Citizenfour* is ultimately a not very interesting documentary that only succeeds in reminding us that those who presume to protect our liberties aren't doing so in terribly competent fashion.