



Sean Wilentz – Court Historian, NSA Shill, and Lickspittle ‘Liberal’

He’s the undertaker at the funeral of American liberalism

by Justin Raimondo, January 22, 2014

So you thought progressives would rally ‘round Edward Snowden’s and Glenn Greenwald’s crusade to rid us of the NSA incubus that’s attached itself to our computers and our daily lives. Well, you were wrong: dead wrong.

With a few notable exceptions, the "progressive" media matrix – the lefty pundits, thinktanks, academics, and activists who make up the Democratic party’s core intellectual constituency – have reacted to the Snowden revelations with hysterical denunciations, not of the government but of the leaker: the hate emanating from the MSNBC studios is hot enough to burn if you get too close to your television. And it’s not just the pundits: Norman Solomon rightly called the response from progressive Democrats in Congress "murky," and that’s certainly an understatement. Sure, some of this can be attributed to partisanship, but there’s an ideological motivation for this illiberal stance as well.

The ideological roots of the anti-Snowden camp on (what passes for) the "Left" are fairly plain: "progressives" have no *principled* objection to the Surveillance State. This hardly comes as a shock: if one sees government as the end-all and be-all of human civilization, the one human agency that can save us from our ills and vices and make us whole again, then why would one object to government surveillance 24/7? After all, government is a benevolent force in our lives, a benefactor rather than an oppressor, and so what’s your problem? *What do you have to hide?*

Of course, the liberals of an earlier generation would have blanched at such a stance. Hadn’t they spent years fighting off J. Edgar Hoover and the Red Squads of the day, the McCarthys and HUAC? Hadn’t they founded the American Civil Liberties Union? Yet the left has undergone a dramatic transformation since the end of the cold war: whereas once the Left had championed civil liberties against those cold war conservatives who saw the Bill of Rights as an obstacle to be overcome, they have now switched polarities – so that ostensibly "right-wing" politicians like Sen. Rand Paul (R-Kentucky) and Rep. Justin Amash (R-Michigan) are leading the fight against the NSA, while the "left" (and by this I mean the moderate center-left) either defends the Obama administration or stays silent.

This ideological role reversal – which occurs every fifty years or so in this country, by the way – is underscored in a recent essay by the historian Sean Wilentz in *The New Republic*, where the

progressive historian – whose work has focused on the role of race and class in American politics – digs up morsels of Internet commentary by Snowden in order to show he's ideologically suspect. The piece has all the hallmarks of a *Pravda* polemic, circa 1933, which purports to demonstrate that Stalin's critics are Trotskyite wreckers on Hitler's payroll. There is no treatment of Snowden's claim that the NSA's intrusive programs violate the Fourth Amendment, or that such a comprehensive spying apparatus conducted in secret represents a mortal threat to our democracy: instead, Snowden, Greenwald, and Julian Assange are given an ideological litmus test at the end of which they are diagnosed as libertarians!

This is their "crime."

Wilentz cites an Internet posting in which Snowden writes: "It's my only gun, but I love it to death." This is the Professor's first clue that Snowden is Not One of Us: "The Walther P22," he avers, "a fairly standard handgun, is not especially fearsome, but Snowden's affection for it hinted at some of his developing affinities." Why, he probably watches "Duck Dynasty"!

Horrors! But there's worse to come.

In one of his posts to *Ars Technica*, Snowden described Hillary Clinton as a "pox": now this may not strike you as an example of Snowden's perfidy, but for Wilentz – a close personal friend of both Hillary and Bill – this is enough to condemn him outright. Wilentz was a fanatical defender of Bill Clinton's oral-sex-in-the-Oval-Office escapade, railing in testimony before Congress that "history will track you down and condemn you for your cravenness" because they dared impeach a President who thought he was above the law. Wilentz's own cravenness before the Powers That Be – after all, how many nobodies have been jailed for *years* because they perjured themselves in a court of law? – is apparently of no concern. Shield the powerful – that's the operational slogan of "historians" like Wilentz.

The litany of Snowden's ideological sins is a familiar one to those of us who have had personal experience confronting the smug arrogance of our "liberal" political class: I mean, Snowden showed "a deep aversion" to Obama and his appointees. Not only that, but he was "furious" when the President appointed Leon Panetta as head of the CIA! What more do we need to know?

Shocked yet? Oh, it gets worse: much *much* worse. The gun-loving Snowden doesn't think Social Security is a necessary government program, and he supports the *gold standard* (just like – heavens-to-mergratroyd! – Ron Paul). The wily Wilentz detects in Snowden "a deep disdain for progressive policies."

Pretty scary, eh?

Oh, and Snowden isn't *really* a civil libertarian, says Wilentz, who avers the NSA revelations were motivated by partisan politics rather than a principled devotion to the Constitution:

"Contrary to his claims, he seems to have become an anti-secrecy activist only after the White House was won by a liberal Democrat who, in most ways, represented everything that a right-wing Ron Paul admirer would have detested."

This is ludicrous: Snowden, disillusioned by his stint in the Geneva CIA station after a Swiss banker was set up by the Agency, had already considered going public in 2007 with what he knew, but waited because he took Obama's campaign promise of government "transparency" seriously. This is on the record, and the facts are easily accessible because of this thing – perhaps Wilentz has heard of it – called the Internet. But facts matter to Wilentz as much as they did to his intellectual predecessors who conducted the Moscow show trials.

Wilentz stretches truth beyond the breaking point when he cites "the high-tech and legal expert Joe Mullin" in support of his thesis that Snowden is motivated by partisan loyalties: he quotes Mullin to the effect that "The Snowden seen in these chats is not the man we see today." But of course that's true, since, as Snowden and others have explained, America's most famous whistleblower was changed by what he came to know about the government's secret spying apparatus. This is made clear simply by looking at his biography: from high school dropout to Army recruit (he wanted to help "free people from oppression") to CIA employee and on to the NSA, where he discovered the secret that turned him around and sent him in a direction he never dreamed of. But since the clear pattern of Snowden's career doesn't fit in with Wilentz's agenda, it is steadfastly ignored:

"[T]here is no reason to doubt that, when Snowden stole the files from the NSA, he still held many of the same views that he expressed as TheTrueHOOHA. Snowden's politics seemed to still be libertarian-right: He sent Ron Paul two contributions of \$250 during the 2012 presidential primaries."

One might not expect a Princeton professor of history with all sorts of awards and commendations to his name to understand libertarianism, or the political character of the Ron Paul campaign. To someone from his social circles, anyone who likes guns, questions the utility of the welfare state, and fails to appreciate Hillary's manifold charms is automatically suspect, no matter what they say or do. It doesn't matter to Wilentz that Snowden's apparent conversion to libertarianism and his support for Ron Paul puts him *outside* the partisan framework. This is precisely why he garnered so much praise, if not outright support, from many authentic liberals, including Glenn Greenwald – who gets the same Vyshinsky-like treatment from Wilentz.

Wilentz starts out by describing Greenwald's lefty background: his father was a socialist and Greenwald a battler for gay rights, and yet:

"[I]n his online travels, he gravitated to right-wing sites such as Townhall, where he could engage in cyber-brawls with social conservatives. Over time, he met some of his antagonists in the flesh and, to his surprise, liked them."

Yes, he *liked* them! Those reactionary, non-Princeton-attending, "Duck Dynasty"-watching rednecks who would never be admitted to Wilentz's social circles, not even through the back door – he actually *made friends* with some of them. Do we need any more proof of Greenwald's political unreliability?

Having quit his job at a high-powered corporate law firm, Greenwald took up the cudgels on behalf of civil liberties – or, as Wilentz puts it:

"It was in his pro bono work that Greenwald discovered his true passion: defending the civil liberties of extremists."

Ah yes, those right-wing extremist friends of his. But of course the vast majority of civil liberties cases involve "extremists" of one sort or another who have been marginalized and isolated to the extent that they are easy pickings for government prosecutors and regulators with little regard for the First Amendment. While Wilentz grudgingly acknowledges this, the whole point of this section of his smear screed is to detail the unlovely views of the defendants, subtly implying that birds of a feather stick together. This is Jamie Kirchick territory.

The proximity of this section to a reiteration of Greenwald's formerly held views on immigration is intentional: in a political culture where political incorrectness is the cardinal sin, that Greenwald ever held the view that opening the floodgates to unlimited immigration from abroad is anything but an absolute good is akin to uncovering a deep interest in child pornography. At Princeton, they'd hang him in effigy and drive him off campus: never mind that Greenwald's views on immigration – which have undergone a dramatic change since he met his Brazilian boyfriend! – are completely irrelevant to his reporting on the Snowden story.

Wilentz realizes this, but he's out to make a larger point: that Greenwald isn't a party-lining "progressive" with easily predictable views, like himself, but an independent thinker who is "untrustworthy" – a theme that runs through Wilentz's jeremiad and is applied equally to Snowden, Greenwald, and Julian Assange. The subliminal message here is: you can trust the all-knowing all-seeing all-wise US government, but certainly not these dubious individuals.

For the whole of the modern era, the "right" and the "left" have collaborated in ways that have kept the US government growing, in power and scope, and this pleases people like Wilentz – a right-wing Social Democrat of a familiar type – to no end. He is part of the Great Consensus which caused some neocons to declare "the end of ideology," or, a few decades later, "the end of history." There are, they declared, no more big ideological battles to fight; History (capital 'H') has settled on Western "liberal" democracy as the final form of human government, and it only remains for us to quibble about the details. The New Deal, the Great Society, etc. *ad nauseum*, are accomplished facts and indisputable: the Welfare-Warfare State is here to stay, on a global scale, and anyone who thinks otherwise is a black reactionary – and dangerous, to boot.

What Wilentz and his ilk fear most is a union of the marginalized remnants of the conservative-libertarian "right" and the anti-imperialist "left" against the essentially authoritarian and paternalistic "center." To wit:

"By this point, Greenwald had come to reside in a peculiar corner of the political forest, where the far left meets the far right, often but not always under the rubric of libertarianism. He held positions that appealed to either end of the political spectrum, attacking, for example, U.S. foreign policy as a bipartisan projection of empire. Like most of his writings, his critique of America abroad was congenial both to the isolationist paleo-Right and to post-New Left anti-imperialists. His social liberalism struck an individualist chord pleasing to right-wing libertarians as well as left-wing activists. Greenwald began to envisage bringing these groups together – to dissolve the usual lines of political loyalty and unite the anti-imperialists and civil-

liberties activists on the left with the paleoconservatives and free-market libertarians on the right – in a popular front against the establishment alliance of mainstream center-left liberals and neoconservatives."

How does Wilentz know what Greenwald envisaged, if indeed he envisaged anything? This is the typical methodology of the conspiracy theorist, given full-throated expression by the ridiculous title given to this article: "Would You Feel Differently About Snowden Greenwald, and Assange If You Knew What They Really Thought?" Through some mysterious telepathic process he *knows* what's in the minds of the conspirators. He *knows* that, instead of Greenwald's positions evolving quite naturally through his own experience, it was all a nefarious plot from the very beginning to unite those "extremists" he was so fond of defending in his lawyerly days. The goal being the creation of a vast "popular front" (you know, like the *Communists* of the 1930s!) to upend the "establishment," in whose asshole Wilentz is so firmly entrenched.

Which raises an interesting point: why should we exempt Wilentz from the sort of ideological colonoscopy he subjects Snowden, Greenwald, and Assange to? What is this "establishment alliance of mainstream center-left liberals and neoconservatives" – aside, that is, from Hillary Clinton's political base?

Let's look at the particular components of *his* pro-NSA popular front: Wilentz is allying himself with Dick Cheney, the *Weekly Standard*, and the scores of lesser neocons who not only initiated many of the NSA's most invasive programs, but who, together, are responsible for lying us into a disastrous war and bankrupting the country in the process. Yes, this is what "progressivism" has come to: just another neocon front group!

Wilentz, by the way, has a photo of none other than Bob Dylan on his Twitter page: this washed up Sixties professor, with his made-to-order "center-left" opinions and his refusal to engage with anyone who disagrees with him – as noted in this review of his book on the Reagan years – is the perfect champion of the "center-left"/neocon Popular Front. Just another former hippie who's gone and joined the Establishment – is there a more tired life-narrative than that?

Jessalyn Radack, national security and human rights director at the Government Accountability Project, noted on "Huffpost Live" that Wilentz seems to have done no original research, and has "borrowed" whole phrases from various hit pieces aimed at Snowden and Greenwald. Someone should really go back and compare the Wilentz smear with previous smears by the crew over at *The Exiled*, which is doing a bang up job of promoting the NSA's talking points especially aimed at self-styled "progressives." Mark Ames, former editor of *The Exile* – a pornographic Moscow-based rag featuring the ultra-nationalist ravings of "National Bolshevik" party Fuehrer Eduard Limonov – has made a second career out of "exposing" the libertarian "conspiracy" to conquer the world and wipe out the human race just so Charles and David Koch can have a good laugh. Ames has leveled precisely the same "charges" at Greenwald and Snowden, and if Wilentz's prose isn't copied word for word it's only because he doesn't take as many risks as, say, Doris Kearns Goodwin.

Wilentz goes through all the familiar libertarian-baiting rigmarole, although with less entertaining adjectives than the frothy-mouthed Ames:

"Greenwald found common ground with the upper echelons of right-wing free-market libertarianism. In August 2007, he appeared at the Cato Institute's headquarters in Washington. 'I'm a real admirer of Cato,' Greenwald declared, 'and of the work that Cato does and has done for the last six years under the Bush presidency.' He was not only referring to Cato's criticism of the war on terror. Under Bush, Greenwald explained, 'a political realignment' had occurred, one that rendered 'traditional ideological disputes' irrelevant. Politics now turned on a fundamental question: 'Are you a believer in the constitutional principles on which the country was founded and a believer in the fact that no political leader can exercise vast and unchecked powers?' To this question, Greenwald had a ready answer: 'I find myself on the side of the Cato Institute and other defenders of what in the 1990s was viewed as a more right-wing view of limited government power.'"

Is it possible to admire Cato without being a libertarian? Ask the officers and supporters of the American Civil Liberties Union, who have appeared on stage with Cato in common cause on many occasions. Do they agree with all or even most of Cato's policy prescriptions? No, but why is that important?

This is the essential question Wilentz's libertarian-baiting evokes. Well, it *is* important if you're an ideologue out to smear your political enemies. It is if you're a political partisan who happens to be chummy with a woman we know hates Snowden and all he stands for, and who must win over a good chunk of the Democratic party activists who sympathize with this right-wing reactionary Ron Paul supporter and his sinister journalistic Svengali before she can run for President.

If Wilentz thinks Greenwald is personally responsible for the left-libertarian alliance he hates and fears so much, he is a joke as an historian. Given the trajectory of recent history – perpetual war, a "terrorism" scare, and corrupt politicians intent only on increasing their own power – such a realignment was practically inevitable. You don't need to construct a conspiracy theory out of very little cloth to have predicted it.

But to concede this would be to concede the legitimacy of the civil libertarian reaction to the Snowden revelations – and turn our attention away from the individuals involved and focus on the NSA programs themselves.

What he wants us to look at is an imaginary conspiracy, supposedly engineered by the libertarian Leninist Greenwald, who "had identified a vehicle for a political realignment: the presidential candidacy of the old libertarian warhorse Ron Paul."

This comes as complete news to me – and I do have some familiarity with the subject: Wilentz offers zero evidence for his assertion. Greenwald never endorsed Paul, nor was he ever asked to. The total amount of fuel Greenwald contributed to his alleged "vehicle" amounted to a few nice things he had to say about the candidate. But, again, the Wilentzian method of historical "research" doesn't involve unearthing any actual facts: it consists merely of repeating the largely irrelevant polemics of his neoconservative allies, whose disregard for mere facts is a matter of high principle.

The whole panoply of classic smear tactics formerly employed chiefly by the neocons are copied almost verbatim by Wilentz, and who brings up every right-wing bogeyman in the book and then some: Ron Paul is identified as "a longtime supporter of the John Birch Society," and a "quintessential paleoconservative," a characterization that would make actual paleoconservatives stifle a laugh. Perhaps Wilentz should stick to the Jacksonian era in his forays into political taxonomy, because the paleocons are most certainly not on the same page as the libertarian Paul, although they might find him the least objectionable politicians amongst a sorry bunch. Paleocons are against free trade, unlike Paul, and they do indeed want to legislate morality, again unlike Paul. On foreign policy and the Surveillance State – major issues of late – Paul and the paleocons are as one. Which is to say that Paul's "support" for the Birchers is akin to Greenwald's "support" for Paul, i.e. situational and conditional.

Yes, Paul has spoken before meetings of the JBS – I personally attended one such dinner meeting, back in the 1990s, with my boyfriend. It was a gas sitting there with all those little old ladies in tennis shoes – who charmingly fussed over my boyfriend, by the way – while Ron laid out his vision of an overweening federal government that's trying to inveigle its way into every corner of our lives. The Birch Society, by the way, opposes the NSA – unlike Professor Wilentz.

If NSA fans of the "center-left," as per Wilentz, can ally themselves with war criminals like Cheney, Bush, and the Scooter Libbys of this world, then why can't Greenwald hook up with Paul – and, by extension, the goddamn John Birch Society? I'll take Robert Welch over Norman Podhoretz any day.

Speaking of the neocons, Wilentz's ranting against the Paulian movement echoes all the familiar smear tropes rolled out by the *Commentary* crowd against the same target: we hear about the America First Committee (depicted as evil, although we are never told by Wilentz what they stood for and what they opposed). We hear about the "isolationists" and the paleocons – motivated by "hatred" (of centralized government, that is), who have lived "on the fringes" – until now. These Sinister Forces, Wilentz tells us, are being brought to life by the libertarian Leninist Greenwald and his co-conspirators! To arms! To arms!

What, no mention of Father Coughlin?

It's ridiculous to have to even correct this Bizarro World version of American political history, but what can one say about someone who doesn't know the difference between a libertarian, a paleocon, and an unaffiliated liberal with a rather large and quite effective chip on his shoulder?

The "isolationist" epithet is thrown around in relation to Paul (and Greenwald) in the same manner a particularly intemperate and downright crude racist might throw around the "n"-word. Now it's hardly fair to make such an analogy: it's actually kind of smarmy, but it's certainly *less* smarmy than Wilentz's attempt to drag in the infamous Ron Paul newsletters and link them to Greenwald, and, by extension, Snowden. Those newsletters were not written by Ron and he disavowed them when they came out: he apologized, and has never said or written anything that can possibly be construed as even remotely racist. Not that this matters to the Professor, whose polemic would not get a passing grade in any classroom but his own.

Wilentz says Greenwald was "confronted" "by bloggers" for associating with libertarians. Really? Which bloggers? When? And, most importantly, *why*? The Professor does nothing to clear up this mystery: instead, he wraps the mystery inside the enigma of his own constricted partisan worldview. He just can't understand how Greenwald, "insisting on his left-liberalism," can still praise Ron Paul for his opposition to perpetual war and the NSA's systematic violation of the Fourth Amendment. Because, you see, it's all about "governing," i.e. it's all about *power*, as far as Wilentz is concerned:

"In a debate with The Nation columnist Katha Pollitt, Greenwald justified how progressives could back Ron Paul over Obama. How his vaunted allies would govern over issues that he professes to hold dear – Social Security, Medicare, economic inequality, gay rights – is a subject he has not addressed."

In light of what we now know about the scope and breadth of the NSA's Orwellian spying, I'll bet a lot of the progressives unconvinced at the time are now wishing they had listened to Greenwald – and this is what scares the "center-left" neocons like Wilentz, who are quite comfortable with the Surveillance State peering over their shoulders and kind of like being citizens of the mightiest Empire the world has ever known. It makes knowing the Clintons so much more of an advantage, if you know what I mean.

Julian Assange gets the same treatment as Greenwald and Snowden, only times ten. We get all the rehashed drivel dreamed up by the neocons and then some, including tales of a Russian conspiracy to back Assange and block release of certain supposedly incriminating documents procured by Wikileaks and damaging to the Russian government. These documents are never identified. Wilentz tells us the Russians were granted "privileged access" to material pertaining to Putin's government, an easily exposed lie – since Wikileaks has a policy of releasing everything, and has done so in the case diplomatic traffic related to the Kremlin, as anyone can see online.

The "rape" charges, which Wilentz gives credence to, are naturally brought up, along with bits of gossip here and there, such as a veritable reiteration of neocon journalist Michael Moynihan's smear piece supposedly linking Assange to a dubious character by the name of Israel Shamir. The "links" and "ties" of Wilentz's elaborate demonology are complex and somewhat obscure: there are no *real* links, i.e. Internet links to research showing evidence of his assertions. There aren't even any footnotes, but perhaps this is too much to expect of Princeton's premier historian.

In going after Assange, Wilentz's conspiracy theory takes on the emotional atmosphere of a Tom Clancy novel. This cold war liberal has recreated the era in which his reified ideology was relevant by conjuring up a hair-brained conspiracy theory summed up in his version of how Snowden escaped Obama's clutches: "*Izvestia*," we are told, "divulged that the Kremlin and its intelligence services, in collaboration with WikiLeaks, had completed Snowden's escape."

After some 10,000 or so words expressing nothing but innuendo, guilt-by-association, and unbearable arrogance, even the most dutiful reader will be forgiven for giving up at this point. As for myself: out of morbid curiosity – the same inexplicable compulsion that drives masochists to

watch one of Lyndon LaRouche's one-hour "presidential" speeches to the bitter end – I have to press onward and downward. After all, it's my job.

Wilentz goes on to make a very weak case for the "not so bad" narrative – contending that the NSA is telling the truth and really isn't scooping up all our communications – and then goes on to appropriate the case recently proffered by Fred Kaplan, who claims that the programs revealed by Snowden and reported on by Greenwald involved not only domestic spying but also perfectly "legitimate" surveillance of the Taliban in Pakistan. One has to wonder, however, how much access to hi-tech devices Taliban soldiers in the field really have, or need: one suspects the Taliban's military fortunes aren't going to be affected by the NSA one way or the other. The Taliban angle is just part of the smear-mongering methodology employed by neocons – and now by Clintonian partisans like Wilentz – to characterize opponents of the National Security State as not only "extremists" but also traitors.

This is the end of the road for American liberalism, no matter what the quasi-libertarian remnants of the old-fashioned variety (like Greenwald) say or would like to believe: the old liberalism of someone like Oswald Garrison Villard, a founding editor of *The Nation*, has been replaced by a soulless managerial "progressivism" that combines all the worst features of "left" and "right" ideology. In domestic politics, the New Progressivism embraces big government – and bigness per se – in all its incarnations. Remember that Wilentz was enraged by the fact that Snowden opposed Obama's economic "stimulus" program – yet more evidence of the leaker's "extremism." Abroad, the "national security Democrats" are playing the same old neocon game: the promotion of "democracy," at gun point if necessary. If you're against that, you're one of those dreaded "isolationists," and probably a racist paleocon gun-toting Ron Paul supporter to boot.

"Surveillance and secrecy will never be attractive features of a democratic government," intones the Professor, "but they are not inimical to it, either. This the leakers will never understand." I don't know what Snowden, Greenwald, and Assange understand, but I do know that libertarians understand this fully – which is precisely why we oppose a "democratic" ideology that runs roughshod over the rights of minorities, and fight to restore the Constitution, which protects our inherent rights against the rule of rampaging "democrats."

One has to wonder, however, how Wilentz greets the news that a majority of the American people oppose the NSA and support Snowden's fight to expose its depredations. Something tells me his alleged support for "democratic" principles will not survive that particular test.

NOTES IN THE MARGIN

You can check out my Twitter feed by going [here](#). But please note that my tweets are sometimes deliberately provocative, often made in jest, and largely consist of me thinking out loud.

I've written a couple of books, which you might want to peruse. Here is the link for buying the second edition of my 1993 book, *Reclaiming the American Right: The Lost Legacy of the Conservative Movement*, with an Introduction by Prof. George W. Carey, a Foreword by Patrick J. Buchanan, and critical essays by Scott Richert and David Gordon (ISI Books, 2008).

You can buy *An Enemy of the State: The Life of Murray N. Rothbard* (Prometheus Books, 2000), my biography of the great libertarian thinker.