



Snowden's stand for a globalised generation

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[Edward Snowden](#)'s secrets must be secret indeed. In certain circles, his name is as unmentionable as Voldemort's. A former "infrastructure analyst" for America's National Security Agency, he revealed a cache of secret documents to the UK's Guardian newspaper in June, detailing how the [NSA](#) had been collecting information on vast numbers of phone calls made in the US. He also revealed the existence of Prism, a mass data interception program, and Tempora, a similar program run by GCHQ, the NSA's British equivalent.

On Tuesday Andrew Parker, the new director-general of MI5, the UK domestic intelligence service, [used his first big speech](#) to denounce Mr Snowden's revelations as a gift that enables terrorists "to evade us and strike at will". But nowhere did he mention Mr Snowden's name. The following day at the Cato Institute in Washington, Oregon's Democratic senator, [Ron Wyden](#) – who sees things very differently from Mr Parker – made a similar omission. He called for an end to bulk intelligence-gathering in light of "the June revelations". Whose revelations? He did not say.

Both those inclined to defend Mr Snowden's deed and those inclined to deplore it have been slow to vent their opinions on the man. They seem uncertain where the judgment of history will fall. Mr Snowden is a man of contradictions. He left school for a while in his mid-teens but has a way with the English language. He contributed to the 2012 presidential campaign of Ron Paul, which many Americans would consider the act of an arch-reactionary, but gave the spying scoop to the Guardian, which other Americans would consider a tribune of world revolution. Certain facts in his case remain unclear – such as whether he was quietly invited to Russia, where he now has political asylum, or whether he initiated the trip himself when he came to fear extradition from Hong Kong; and whether Russia and China were able to gain access to any of the data he spirited abroad.

A more basic confusion concerns what Mr Snowden thinks he is defending. Rights, certainly, but what kind of rights? Constitutional or human? To the extent he defends the former, he is a patriotic watchdog. To the extent he defends the latter, he is a cosmopolitan hacktivist. When he

says, “I do not want to live in a world where everything I do and say is recorded”, he sounds like a classic defender of privacy rights. The fourth amendment protects the right of Americans to be “secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects”. Defending the right not to reveal things is worlds apart from the utopian internet idea that “information wants to be free”. Viewed this way, Mr Snowden’s quest has little in common with the anti-Americanism of Julian Assange’s WikiLeaks.

Yet Mr Snowden belongs to a globalised generation that sees rights as tied more to common sense than to citizenship. Circumstances, at the very least, have forced him into a marriage of convenience with WikiLeaks, one of whose representatives accompanied him to Moscow. He has wound up, in the eyes of the world, defending human rights, not constitutional rights.

The right to be protected from unwarranted search and seizure is an Anglo-American constitutional right par excellence. It exists only in countries determined to fight for it, and not all countries want it to the same degree. As technology empowers both the law-abiding and the criminal, government imposes new restraints. The question is what to restrain. There appears to be a bias for “real”, physical freedoms (such as movement) over “abstract”, intellectual ones (such as privacy and opinion). The NSA and GCHQ programmes are consistent with this approach. Mr Parker’s generation stresses the trade-offs. Mr Snowden’s, whether out of idealism or foolishness, ignores them.

Part of Mr Parker’s case against Mr Snowden is sensible. “It causes enormous damage,” he said on Tuesday, “to make public the reach and limits of GCHQ techniques.” Even if terrorists ought to know they are being watched, they may be inclined to rationalise their own security lapses rather than take all the precautions they might.

But Mr Parker’s reasons for telling us not to worry about government abuse of data are less reassuring. “The idea that we either can or would want to operate intensive scrutiny of thousands,” he says, “is fanciful.” It is fanciful to a person whose passion is Mr Parker’s: defending his country. It may not be so fanciful to a minister, now or in the future, whose passion is winning elections.

Mr Snowden’s crusade is an awkward fit with his constituency. This is why his name sometimes goes missing when people talk about what he has done. Mr Parker might not want to call him an outright enemy. Mr Wyden might think it risky to call him a friend.