

# The Washington Times

## NSA leaker Edward Snowden heats up simmering security debate to boil

By: Guy Taylor- August 14, 2013

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Some call him a patriot whistleblower, while others say he is neither patriot nor whistleblower — and may be even a traitor. Either way, Edward Snowden has become a Rorschach test for how Americans young and old see their government and how it balances security with privacy.

At a minimum, analysts say, the Snowden affair is pumping unprecedented life into a much-needed debate between those who believe U.S. intelligence agents should monitor Americans in the name of national security versus those who believe the government is wildly encroaching on constitutionally protected privacy.

Whichever side a person takes, Mr. Snowden's revelations about the National Security Agency's deep-reaching data collection efforts "set something vibrating that was not vibrating before," said Gordon Adams, an international relations professor at American University who served on President Clinton's national security staff.

"Whether you're a libertarian or a liberal," Mr. Adams said, "there's been a tectonic shift in people's concern about their civil liberties, and Snowden set it loose."

"I don't know if that makes him a patriot or a criminal."

President Obama has no doubts. For him, Mr. Snowden is no patriot and in fact has been more disruptive than helpful in sparking a thoughtful debate that the president felt he set into motion earlier this year.

"I called for a thorough review of our surveillance operations before Mr. Snowden made these leaks," Mr. Obama said at a news conference last week. "My preference — and I think the American people's preference — would have been for a lawful, orderly examination of these laws; a thoughtful, fact-based debate that would then lead us to a better place."

The president also said that if Mr. Snowden wanted to be a whistleblower, he could have followed established procedures that would have given him protections.

Others say Mr. Snowden performed a service.

"To call him a traitor is going too far," Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, California Republican, said Friday during a "Newsmaker" interview on C-SPAN. "In fact, he was being loyal to the rest of us by letting the American people know that their government was getting out of hand."

The most remarkable thing may well be the manner in which debate around that very question has come to unfold in such politically unpredictable ways over the past two months.

"This has kind of scrambled partisan lines like no issue in recent memory," said Trevor Timm, a blogger and activist with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a group that advocates for digital civil liberties.

Mr. Timm, who recently penned an op-ed for Politico arguing that Americans believe Mr. Snowden is "a patriot," said the revelations by the former NSA contractor have turned out to be "the most bipartisan thing that's happened in years on both sides."

"The guardians of civil liberties exist in both parties," Mr. Adams said. "It crushes the normal party instinct, so you get strange coalitions around it and you're seeing that in Congress right now."

One needn't look far for confirmation.

House Speaker John A. Boehner, Ohio Republican, got in front of the debate in early June when he declared that Mr. Snowden was "a traitor" for disclosing information that "puts Americans at risk" and "shows our adversaries what our capabilities are."

That put Mr. Boehner in line with outspoken critics such as Sen. Dianne Feinstein, California Democrat, who has accused Mr. Snowden of committing "an act of treason."

Sen. Ron Wyden, Oregon Democrat and a longtime critic of government surveillance, stopped short of using the word "patriot" in reference to Mr. Snowden during a July 23 speech in Washington at the Center for American Progress.

The congressman did say, however, that Mr. Snowden's actions "lit the surveillance world on fire."

"Several provisions of secret law were no longer secret, and the American people were finally able to see some of the things I've been raising the alarm about for years," Mr. Wyden said. "And when they did, boy were they stunned, and boy were they angry."

The problem, some observers say, is that the media and elected officials in Washington remain too focused on questions about Mr. Snowden's character to engage in the sort of deep policy discussion that Mr. Obama claims to be so eager to have.

"The whole debate over whether Snowden is hero or a traitor is a bit of a sideshow and that it ultimately doesn't matter very much," said Gene Healy a vice president and analyst at the Libertarian-leaning Cato Institute. "The real issue is what he revealed."

"If he turned out to be a Chinese spy," Mr. Healy said, "the government has still now admitted that this program exists and that's what we ought to be focused on, debating the program, whether it's legal, whether it's useful and whether it's dangerous."