

# An Open Letter to Edward Snowden

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Dear Sir,

It cannot have been easy for you. I know something of what it is to walk away from one's country of birth, leaving one's family and friends, and to settle in a far-away place. The circumstances in my case were less immediately pressing: I was not a fugitive. I left Amerika to study abroad; while abroad I discovered that I liked abroad much better. My later jetisoning of Amerikan citizenship was prophylactic. As my sister once remarked, I am not an *ex*-patriot--I never *was* a patriot.

I think you did a courageous thing and the right thing. I also think you broke the law. And therein lies the rub. You cannot expect a government to accept that breaking the law is ever the right thing to do; governments never officially acknowledge that civil disobedience is justified. But posterity will vindicate you, as it has vindicated many other civil disobedients before. In some respects, partial vindication has already begun: the Senate Intelligence Committee has publicly announced that it is determined to reign in the NSA: both its methods and its choice of targets are to be subject to closer Congressional scrutiny. Several other nations have expressed an intention to re-route Internet traffic away from U.S. links, to prevent mass surveillance of data. These are good things, and they would not have happened but for your revelations.

Governments of the day invariably mistake their own interest for that of the nation. The present administration in Washington D.C. is no exception. The U.S. government could easily demonstrate that you harmed the interests of the National Security Agency, ignoring the fact that the interests of national security might be different from, or indeed incompatible with, those of the National Security *Agency*. Do not expect a fair trial if they should ever get you in custody; a guilty verdict is a foregone conclusion. Pleading that you did the right thing, that you were defending individuals' rights or world peace, would be to no avail; a judge is bound to consider only whether you broke some law, not whether what you did was right in any higher sense, constitutionally, morally, or internationally.

Speaking as one nerd to another, I was not surprised by your revelations. Much of what the NSA did (and presumably still is doing) in trawling for data, I knew to be feasible--I myself have trained people (including, among others, the German *Bundes Nachrichten Dienst*) to do similar things. What did surprise me was the scale of it, and the depth of the paranoia which lies behind it. It is sobering indeed to realize that the U.S. government is running so scared these days that it deemed it necessary, prudent, and appropriate to intercept and document *every* email and telephone connection entering or leaving the country. Not since the Stasi undertook to steam open every letter entering Communist East Germany has the world seen such a maniacal effort to control people. Of course, the U.S. government would never admit that this is a fear reaction; the U.S. government would no doubt claim that it is merely "monitoring" current threats in order to "protect" ordinary citizens. But monitoring invariably creeps over into controlling.

I belong to a different generation than yours; I grew up with Watergate. During that time, a U.S. president misused the FBI to spy on domestic political opponents. Whenever a government spies on innocent people, it in effect treats them as no longer innocent, and this itself is a grievous affront to liberty. As your revelations have made clear, the potential for abuse of surveillance is still very real. Moreover, given the global reach of the NSA compared with that of the FBI during the Nixon years, the threat to liberty is greater than ever before.

I take you to be a man of principle and conscience. If Thoreau's words-- "It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right"--resonate with you, then I should like to make your acquaintance. We could play chess or plough through Wireshark trace files together (find the missing bit). If you should ever make it to Switzerland, I'll buy you a drink (being careful to remove the battery from my mobile phone). You'll find my public key elsewhere at this web site.

Kind regards, FqF



Graffiti seen in Bern, Switzerland, just around the corner from the U.S. embassy.



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