

SNOWDEN (2016)

A MOVIE DIRECTED BY OLIVER STONE

A REVIEW

Edward Snowden, an NSA contractor, leaked a large number of secret documents that contributed to a debate about individual privacy and the scope of government activity in cyberspace.

Snowden is now in self imposed exile in Russia. He is trying to return to the United States without long term incarceration.

The public view of Snowden is a spectrum from traitor to patriot. The basic facts about Snowden's leak are in dispute. The "truth" about Snowden will probably never be disclosed. Important for Snowden is the "narrative" of his actions and motivations.

Oliver Stone's movie Snowden is a laudatory view of Edward Snowden's actions. It will contribute to an unknown extent to the narrative about this historical event.

In this note Stone's movie will be examined in the light of other materials about Snowden and in light of the incomplete data available.

Of the moviegoers who saw the film a number of comments emerged:

Gary Marchant felt that Snowden's motivations were not clearly malign or self-interested.

Yvonne Stevens commented that, " Based on the facts of the movie only, we need better whistleblower systems in place that protect and promote society's interest yet don't make the country vulnerable."

All felt that the data available were significantly incomplete.

Diana Calica contributed the following background material and review of the movie.

BACKGROUND

“Reading Oliver Stone's biography in Wikipedia, one can't help but be impressed by his productivity and success as a writer/director. What is disconcerting, however, are the reported inaccuracies of events portrayed as truths in some of his films. For example, in response to complaints of falsehoods in *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS*, Stone apologized to Turkey for his "over-dramatization". *THE DOORS* was criticized by band members. Jim Morrison's wife, a consultant to the film, labeled it inaccurate and untruthful, despite hour of interviews with her.

Now we have *SNOWDEN*. The problem here is that Stone will likely employ "over-dramatization", ignoring legitimate accounts of events in favor of his own version. Stone will likely lift Edward Snowden to hero status, an opinion that many viewing the film will take as historical fact, despite evidence to the contrary.

Stone's showing to Congress of his film JFK reportedly aided the passage of the "Assassination Materials Disclosure Act" in 1992 (cf, Wikipedia). What kind of legislative actions could *SNOWDEN* produce?

REVIEW

“Oliver Stone’s captivating film begins with the message that *SNOWDEN* is a “dramatization” of actual events. The basic framework of Snowden’s adult life is there, including his employment record, theft of secret NSA documents, and meetings in Hong Kong with journalists from The Guardian

and *The Intercept*. This history is interwoven with scenes that can only be imagined and add to the drama of the story and its basic premise that Snowden is an idealistic good guy. For example, Snowden's downloading of the NSA files is a dramatic, yet unrealistic scenario; almost as good as a car chase in any thriller movie.

So, in this film we have Edward Snowden, whose noble purpose is to inform the world that the United States government is collecting private data on the US populace and those abroad without their knowledge and without court approval. In the movie, Snowden is dissuaded by his colleagues to go to higher authorities with his information. Snowden leaves the US and turns his stolen data over to journalists in Hong Kong. He then dramatically destroys his copy of the data, leaving it solely in the hands of the reporters.

What is glaringly absent from Stone's film is the reason why Stone did not limit his theft of NSA files to the government's electronic surveillance program of US citizens. It is alleged that Snowden also collected and turned over top secret documents on other subjects that are critical to our national security. Why would he do such a thing? Attached is an article labeled "Snowden's releases". This article gives some idea of the extent to which Snowden may have damaged not only US defense systems, but those of other countries as well. The impact of Snowden's intelligence disclosures, if true, clearly changes his status from good to evil. In our discussion after the movie, Gary questioned what incentive Snowden had to steal the NSA documents. Presumably, he didn't do it for money or for fame. His life has not improved because of it. Is this idealism run amok?

It's reasonable to expect that Snowden's popularity will increase on the basis of this film. Perhaps, there will be a greater voice arguing for a presidential pardon. At the end of his portrayal of Snowden, Stone employs a clever trick. He alternates shots of the real life Snowden with Joseph Gordon-Leavitt, his sympathetic movie look alike. During those

shots, Snowden and the actor morph as one. Gordon-Leavitt, for his part, has reportedly donated his income from *SNOWDEN* to the American Civil Liberties Union. One of their lawyers is Snowden's counsel. Surely others will be equally generous, if not in money, in their opinion of Edward Snowden.”

<https://theintercept.com/2016/09/16/new-film-tells-the-story-of-edward-snowden-here-are-the-surveillance-programs-he-helped-expose/>

The four moviegoers were polled with regard to their rating. *SNOWDEN* was given two B's and two B+'s, for a better than B rating.

All were asked what punishment Snowden should receive for his actions. All remarked that the data available were incomplete. There were two votes for a short period of incarceration, one vote for indefinite exile and one abstention. (The other two choices were, pardon and life in prison/execution.)

In summary, *SNOWDEN* is an enjoyable film about Edward Snowden that shows him in a favorable light.

Finally, for those of you who would like to see some original data, the data given to the news media contained, according to the journalists, about 50,000 documents. Of those approximately 400 documents were published. The published documents are available online (link below)

<http://www.cjfe.org/snowden>

Diana Calica & Arnie Calica

