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July 2013

The Not-So-Simple Saga of Edward and Barack...

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ISSUE 76



THE CITY THAT AMERICA FORGOT

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ISSUE 76

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Editor: Tony Sutton – editor@coldtype.net

The not-so-simple saga of Edward and Barack

Not to mention Ron Paul, the Saudis, the *New York Times*, and your grandma, writes **Michael I. Niman**

It reads like a political thriller. An NSA spook, Edward Snowden, meets his conscience, blows the whistle on a massive secret attack on the Fourth Amendment, and is pursued globally by an obsessed president. Spice things up with a bit of character development cross-pollinated with a history lesson.

First there's Darth President. His administration has earned the distinction of invoking the Espionage Act of 1917 (a constitutionally questionable World War One relic) more than all other presidents in the previous 96 years combined – by a factor of two. The Obama administration has charged eight people under the act. All previous administrations have charged three.

Then there's Snowden – the high school dropout who landed himself a high-paying spy job and donated 500 bucks to Ron Paul's last presidential campaign.

Add in a tinge of Bible and Snowden becomes a modern-day David taking on Goliath. For intrigue, let's start the story by routing our would-be hero's escape from the evil empire through China and Russia. Hide the whistleblower in the sprawling Moscow airport, play some cat-and-mouse, launch a few rumors as to his destination, then capture a presidential jet or two searching for him, and we've got a news story ready-made for a 24-hour infotainment cycle.

Only we don't really have much real news

here. In the hunt for Snowden, we seem to have missed the forest for the trees. The crime – the big crime with hundreds of millions of victims – is the crime that Snowden blew the whistle on. Someone – and I'm purposely vague here, so bear with me – is subverting all that Net 2.0 stuff we've come to love and upon which we've become dependent to violate our Fourth Amendment rights protecting our privacy.

Okay, many of us have long claimed to assume that the shadowy National Security Agency was always spying on us, but really, most of that was just the alcohol talking. We wish we were important enough for somebody, anybody, to give a damn about us.

Snowden documented that somebody actually does. They care very much about each and every one of us. It turns out the government spends tax money scanning your grandmother's telephone usage for anti-American calling patterns.

Aside from being one of the biggest blockbuster political exposés in our nation's history, this story will also fertilize every loony conspiracy theory that Internet trolls can cook up, further distracting us from the real threats we face, politically, environmentally, and economically. So the challenge is to keep our focus on the ball. Not the cue stick.

Notice I haven't said "the government is spying on us," nor have I identified Snowden

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**Technically,
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as a “government whistleblower.” This is where the story, and the legal case against Snowden, both take a twist. Snowden, while sticking it to the NSA harder than anyone in history, putting the reclusive agency on front pages and computer screens around the world, didn’t actually work for the NSA. It turns out that out that in our corporatocracy, every government service is on the table to be transformed into a revenue-stream for Wall Street, the secret agent business included.

Technically, Snowden is a private eye. A hired dick snooping on your hairstylist, dope dealer, and, apparently, you. The spin doctors have settled on using the word “contractor,” a vague catch-all covering everything from mercenaries to cafeteria workers, to describe him. Sort of like “contract killer.” Snowden was a “contractor.” Technically, he was contracted by Booz Allen Hamilton Incorporated to spy on us. And Booz Allen was contracted by the NSA.

According to *Bloomberg Businessweek*, Booz Allen grosses \$5.76 billion in annual revenues, with 99 percent of that bounty coming from our tax dollars. They’re essentially a shadow government agency with no government oversight or control, as evidenced by their hiring patterns. And they’re not alone. Bloomberg reports that approximately 70 percent of the intelligence budget, which in and of itself is top secret, is handed over to private spook shops – or in Bloomberg’s lexicon, “contracted out.” Snowden is just one of an army of private dicks snooping on your grandparents.

Borrowing a concept and a warning from President Dwight D. Eisenhower, it’s apparent we now have ourselves a mega-billion-dollar, government-funded spook-industrial complex. Politically, this means we now have one more entrenched set of corporate interests who will use their economic power – which, according to the 2011 Supreme Court Citizens United ruling, can now translate directly to political power – to perpetuate their own unnecessary existence. I say

“unnecessary” not because spying is unnecessary, though spying on your grandmother probably is, but because government workers did it cheaper – about 40 percent cheaper, according to Bloomberg. And apparently with greater efficacy on the secrets front.

One advantage the spook-industrial complex has, even over the entrenched military-industrial and prison-industrial complexes, is that the secrecy surrounding the intelligence community and especially its budget isolates this sector from what little scrutiny other government contractors face. Tell the public about how their tax money is being squandered and you activate Darth President. The Obama Justice Department, for example, charged one former NSA executive, Thomas Drake, with violating the Espionage Act of 1917, just for speaking to a reporter about excessive money paid to contractors – essentially blowing the whistle on the private spook game. The non prima facie charges were eventually dropped, but the damage was done, with a clear message to other whistleblowers that this administration is in hunting mode.

This new private spook industry has a vested interest in making sure that the NSA continues to want everybody spied upon always. If this surveillance state slows down and the broad spectrum spying stops, so do the lucrative contracts, the fat executive bonuses, the payouts to Wall Street investors, and so on. Apparently, the need to spy has grown to take on a new dimension – it’s now entrenched in Wall Street’s economy. This, more than any perceived security need, will guarantee the continuing growth of the surveillance state and the incarceration state.

But the private spook twist in the story does undermine the “Edward Snowden, NSA leaker” meme. Snowden did not leak NSA secrets, allegedly blowing the whistle on a criminal conspiracy against the US Constitution. Someone else, as yet unnamed, leaked NSA secrets, to Booz Allen. And no one, not in government or in the press, is looking for that criminal – the one

who gave a private corporation access to our private data.

Snowden informed the press of this whole complex story. That's the second elephant in the closet. The cat-and-mouse game, like the conspiracy theories this whole episode will no doubt fuel, distracts us from the fact that private corporations, aided and abetted by the NSA, are spying on the American people. Where a cop can theoretically get a warrant to snoop, a corporation cannot. With corporate snooping, there is no pretense of oversight.

Corporations are essentially stateless, owing their allegiance only to their stockholders (Remember how Ford, GM, and IBM, for example, sold military and Gesta-po equipment to the Third Reich.) Though Booz Allen currently derives almost all of its income from selling its spy services to the US government, it is still very much a multinational corporation, itself owned mostly by the creepy Carlyle Group.

The Carlyle Group is owned in part by the government of the United Arab Emirates and the Saudi royal family. (The bin Laden family divested their Carlyle holdings in October of 2001 after a relative soured the family name.) The group is powerful, with George Bush Senior serving as an advisor at the time George Bush Junior was ramping up the surveillance state Barack Obama now caretakes.

Also troubling, but predictable, is the corporate media response to this story. Snowden blew the whistle to journalist, Glenn Greenwald. Greenwald is a role model for aspiring journalism students. He began as an independent blogger with an impeccable record for accuracy (not shared by much of the mainstream corporate media). He eventually got picked up by the *Guardian* of the UK, one of the world's top news agencies. It's there where Snowden approached him with his blockbuster story, which Greenwald took to press.

Almost as frightening as Snowden's story is the corporate media's response. Not

only have they, for the most part, ignored the real story and focused instead on the whistleblower-on-the-run meme, but some so-called journalists have editorially called for the prosecution of both Snowden and Greenwald, whose crime was not covering up the story. Apparently they would have covered it up had Snowden approached them, in which case we'd have Snowden tucked away in a cage, and no story.

Andrew Ross Sorkin, for example, a *New York Times* reporter, speaking on CNBC, argued for the arrest of Greenwald, the journalist, for reporting the story. NBC's David Gregory, in an interview, suggested to Greenwald that maybe he should be charged with a crime. The *Washington Post's* Paul Farhi questions Greenwald's credentials as a journalist, insinuating that breaking such a daring story is "advocacy" – in this case, I'd say, for preserving the US Constitution, as if censoring the story wouldn't in and of itself be an act of advocacy for a police state.

This later form of advocacy though censorship isn't just acceptable in the mainstream corporate press – it's become the norm. If it wasn't for the cat-and-mouse aspect of this story, and the promise of an OJ-grade trial, it would probably be a non-starter. We've come a long way, in a bad direction, since the *New York Times* published the Pentagon Papers, making leaker Daniel Ellsberg, then facing 113 years in jail charged under the 1917 Espionage Act, into a hero.

I predict that in the long run, this whole affair won't have any real impact on the NSA and proxy spying on the American people. But I suspect it will liven up the conversation on government outsourcing. This is ironic, however, since such privatization of government is a libertarian mantra. And Snowden, the private contractor, is an avid libertarian.

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Dr. Michael I. Niman is a professor of journalism and media studies at SUNY Buffalo State. His previous columns are archived at <http://mediastudy.com>

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