



BOOK REVIEW: PERMANENT RECORD BY EDWARD JOSEPH SNOWDEN

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Abstract: Book review of ‘Permanent Record’ by Edward Joseph Snowden, Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2019, 352 pages, ISBN-10: 1250237238, hardcover 14.99 USD, Kindle 11.99 USD.

Keywords: *Permanent Record; Edward Joseph Snowden; Metropolitan Books; Henry Holt and Company*

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An excitingly readable biography, exposing online surveillance by US intelligence agencies, Permanent Record became a bestseller after the US Attorney General intervened with circulation. The writer, Edward Snowden’s treasure trove of NSA and CIA experience is available on YouTube since 2013. The cinematic account of his life’s tale appeared previously as the 2016 Oliver Stone’s movie Snowden and literary records include articles of the Guardian newspaper, Luke Harding’s book The Snowden Files (2014) and Anatoly Kucherena’s book Time of the Octopus (2015).

Harry Truman reported to have said, “The only thing new in this world is the history you don’t know.” Thus, this three-part book with twenty-nine sections is certainly different and a fabulous read. Part one comprising ten sections describes his naïve early years, fascination with computers, suffering from mononucleosis disease, short military stint and falling in love. Part two, from section eleven to eighteen, describes the inner functional and technological activities of the NSA and CIA mass surveillance drive, his daily errands in mainland USA, Geneva and Hawaii, and his rapid career progression. The part also refers to how such encroaching into privacy was executed beyond constitutional guidelines, popular knowledge and government accountability. The third part of the book tells about his conscience against the mutation of the intelligence community as the fourth state, how he gravitated towards defection, publicizing the evil surveillance enterprise, surviving arrest and exile. Towards the end, Snowden added some unique wrinkles by adding diaries of his wife Lindsay.

A whistleblower, who is considered by many as a traitor and by many as a modern-day hero, Edward Snowden asserted his position in the preface stating "I used to work for the government; now I work for the people." The preface itself is an interesting and revealing read. While he acknowledged the need for intelligence collection, the key argument in the entire book is the preservation of the value of privacy as citizens' basic constitutional right. Snowden writes, "The freedom of a country can only be measured by its respect for the rights of its citizens, and it's my conviction that these rights are in fact limitations of state power that define exactly where and when a government may not infringe into that domain of personal or individual freedoms that during the American Revolution was called "liberty" and during the Internet Revolution is called "privacy." As the principal character of the book and a former NSA-CIA employee, he warns common internet and phone users about how every moment of their life is under surveillance by NSA-CIA developed programs like STELLERWIND, XKEYSCORE, PRISM etc. Snowden created subtle thrills and sensations by layers of events fused with experience and technical processes. Inclusions of photos, maps and diagrams could have enriched the content value but possibly are avoided to dodge future legal ramifications.

He tried to develop awareness about the violation of the constitutional rights of US citizens and the violation of the rights of every human on the planet according to the universal declaration of human rights. Recognizing the need for national security and intelligence for the state, the writer through lucid description tried to convince the citizens, as target audience, about the unchecked violation of privacy and civil liberty by the so-called fourth state. Though many of the issues and events of the book were known and predictable because of the movie and books on Snowden, the storyline remains interesting and has new and stimulating substances. Specially, the third part describes the thrill and suspense of collecting evidence, escape, and exile. Like Victor Ostrovsky's book *By Way of Deception: The Making of a Mossad Officer*, which was a revelation against Mossad assassination missions, Snowden was against the cyber and surveillance measures of NSA-CIA rogue operations and the failure of the US government to end those irregularities.

After reading the book, US citizens and citizens of other countries will get a clear idea about unlawful US surveillance into the private affairs of innocent individuals. Subtly, Snowden suggested using Tor Browser to maintain privacy and avert surveillance. Besides, he discouraged the use of android or iPhones and encouraged the use of primitive button phone.

Permanent Record is predictable in its content and is recommended for leisure reading. Because, as a mid-level employee, Snowden had limited access and negligible influence in NSA or CIA decision-making cycle. The possible moral, institutional and financial discourses at the Federal Government level are naturally absent. Thus, this book will be of limited help for those who wish to unearth the ethical dilemma and cause leading to a lack of accountability.

Snowden's personal and professional motivation for his maiden book was driven by consciousness. As a newcomer to the literary world, he did satisfactory work and has created a welcome addition to the field of autobiography and surveillance.

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