

SNOWDEN: Traitor Or Patriot?

I just saw the film "Snowden". It chronicles the life of NSA intelligence specialist, Edward Snowden, (2003 to 2014) and the events leading to his "whistle blowing" in 2014. Snowden (age 33) leaked an enormous amount of highly classified materials regarding the U.S. government's surveillance efforts globally, to investigative reporters, who in turn published the data in The Guardian and The Washington Post. He felt that these documents provided evidence that the National Security Agency (and affiliate organizations) violated the FISA (Federal Information Security Act). Snowden believed his act of patriotism was essential to the public's 'right to know.'

A quote by Snowden that I found curious is as follows:

"I'm just another guy who sits there day to day in the office, watches what's happening and goes, 'This is something that's not our place to decide, the public needs to decide whether these programs and policies are right or wrong.'"

The movie asks you to examine many questions, including whether or not Snowden is a traitor or a patriot.

Under what circumstances are a person's constitutional rights protected from prosecution? How has this changed in our country following the events of 9/11?

From a personal perspective, my 5th birthday was on 9/11. So the past 15 years of my life have been informed by the events at the Twin Towers in NYC while I was sitting in kindergarten in NH. I had no understanding of the impact of these events on my generation and current politics then. This movie raises big questions now.

In terms of the elements that served to tell the story, we should consider cinematography, performances and direction. I especially liked seeing the layout of the government locations where Snowden worked. I thought they provided a driver's seat sort of experience for the viewer, imagining what navigating such secure installations might feel like. I appreciated the footage depicting the NSA offices in Hawaii, Japan, and Washington DC. The pacing of the film was eerily consistent.

Regarding cinematography: Certain elements in the film were used to heighten tension, urgency and a sense of secrecy or the idea that everyone is being watched in everyday life like; the use of a Rubik's Cube shifting in Snowden's hand, or visual depiction that common, every day electronics could all be turned into "listening" devices (aka Big Brother is watching). These images were hyper focused through Snowden's eyes. His character narrated scenes to backfill details in the story concerning relationships supporting details, and background. His girlfriend was the foil used to illustrate the emotional impact of this type of work on a person; his co-workers validated the idea of "secrets" and "looking the other way" when it came to surveillance activities or covert operations that exceeded the rules of engagement. His interaction with superiors was often of the most quietly sinister nature - revealing pressure to remain quiet and complicit in activities that seemed patently illegal.

In terms of acting. the strongest performances came from Levitt, Woodley and supporting characters Zachary Quinto, Melissa Leo and Tom Wilkinson, as the journalists with whom Snowden shared classified information. The majority of actors in supporting roles gave steady performances, particularly the reporters, coworkers at various NSA offices, field agents and

supervisors. The only true stand out performances from a quietly knowing & sinister perspective, were Ifans and Olyphant in particular. Nicholas Cage's character was almost a cautionary preview for what Snowden's character could be reduced to depending on how he handled what he learned with the NSA.

Levitt did a remarkable job capturing the vocal cadence, mannerisms, and body language of Snowden's character. He made Snowden very likable, compassionate, principled, honest, highly intelligent and top of his game. It makes the programs that Snowden created more believable. Snowden was, in fact, responsible for 3 critical programs later appropriated by the NSA -- Epic Shelter, Heartbeat and Prism -- for their global surveillance agenda.

Woodley turned in a emotionally credible performance as Lindsey Mills, Snowden's girlfriend. She grounded the substance of his character. You saw Snowden through her eyes as gentle, caring, and honest. You like him and you're pulling for him. His relationship with the journalists enhanced the quality of his character's choice.

In terms of the writing and direction, there are a lot of divergent opinions and perspectives about Oliver Stone's depiction of the actual story. Some critics say Stone saw elements of Snowden in himself -- the patriotic radical. However, one aspect that the film amplifies is the U.S. developed and deployed a system of mass surveillance without democratic consent. I was convinced by Levitt's performance of a man courageous enough to knowingly reveal sensitive information that would alter his life forever, and the courage, sincerity, and conviction that may have taken.

I understood, from Snowden's perspective, why he felt compelled to do what he did. I can imagine that Snowden might have been in the same camp as Benjamin Franklin when he said "Those who would give up an essential liberty to purchase a little temporary security deserve neither..."

As I look at the events of the current election year, I wonder how the questions raised in this film will be addressed by the new leadership. Certainly key decisions by both the Bush & Obama administrations are examined during the course of this film, as they relate to privacy, the right to know, and transparency in government policies--specifically around enforcement of laws like FISA in all government agencies. Is our government bound by the same laws that govern its' people?

Whether you agree or disagree with the story, the point of view it was told from, the actions of Snowden or otherwise, the questions raised in the film are as relevant today, if not more so than when our Constitution was written. The price of liberty and freedom versus the price of security is one of the biggest philosophical and practical questions of our time. I believe none of us can afford to go to sleep. The ramifications are too costly. The question I was left with was "How far would I be willing to risk to tell the truth?"

This was a challenging film for me to rate to be honest. It makes a lot of good points about our society today while still tackling a very controversial topic. I do however feel that this is an important film and warrants your time. I don't think the timing of this film was an accident given the current presidential campaign.

I'm going to give "Snowden" 3.8/5 stars.