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# Assessing Edward Snowden, six months later

By Tom Keane | GLOBE COLUMNIST    DECEMBER 29, 2013

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In a two-minute video recorded in Moscow and broadcast by Britain's Channel 4 Wednesday, Edward Snowden addresses concerns over surveillance in an age of technological advancement.

EDWARD SNOWDEN is holed up in Russia as 2013 gives way to 2014. It's been just over six months since his initial revelations about spying by the National Security Agency made headlines worldwide. Some, including the US government, branded him a traitor. He had taken his job on the condition that he would maintain secrecy, they pointed out. He had then revealed information that would help our enemies, imperiling an elaborate system of surveillance whose only goal, after all, was to keep Americans safe. Others — and I'm one of them — called him an American hero for his willingness to take great personal risks to expose potential wrongdoing.

Over the months, Snowden continued to leak information about the wide variety of eavesdropping efforts the NSA had undertaken. In a lengthy interview with Washington Post reporter Barton Gellman last week, he seemed satisfied with what he had set in motion. “For me . . . the mission’s already accomplished,” Snowden said.

That’s an unfortunate choice of words, given George W. Bush’s 2003 stumble over the same claim, but as the year ends, it is worth asking precisely what Snowden has accomplished and whether his critics should reconsider their view.

What he told us was breathtaking.

There was, first off, the extraordinary list of data-collection efforts sponsored by or connected to the NSA, from the call database (collecting phone records from the likes of AT&T and Verizon) to cryptically named programs such as PRISM (data collection from nine major Internet companies), Boundless Informant (meta-data collection of all communications), Tempora (a British scheme to tap fiber-optic cables), and Bullrun (a program to defeat encryption). We discovered that US surveillance efforts were abetted by spy agencies from a host of other nations, including the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and Israel. At least 35 world leaders learned they were subject to US spying, prompting German’s Angela Merkel to tell President Obama, “This is like the Stasi,” the infamous East German secret police.

At first both dismissive and defensive, President Obama called in August for an outside examination of US intelligence activities. That review concluded earlier this month, with a set of 46 recommendations that proposed significantly enhanced scrutiny of the NSA and limits on some of its programs. (One member of that panel, University of Chicago law professor Geoffrey Stone, said there was no evidence the NSA’s collection of phone records had stopped any terrorism at all.) Also this month, a federal district court judge ruled some NSA activities unconstitutional, saying they violated the Fourth Amendment and calling them “almost Orwellian.”

Perhaps most importantly, Snowden’s whistleblowing prompted a fierce debate in the United States about privacy and the extent of the government’s powers to snoop into citizens’ lives. Absent Snowden’s actions, that debate wouldn’t have occurred; it is, after all, impossible to have a discussion about something you don’t even know is occurring.

Much has been made of Snowden signing a nondisclosure agreement, known as Standard Form 312, when he started working for the US government. There is no question Snowden violated that agreement, and in the eyes of many, that violation is sufficient to label him a turncoat. But as citizens we all have a deeper responsibility. Naturalized citizens take an oath that pledges them to “support and

defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America.” Whether we are naturalized or not, that obligation applies to all of us. And when an agreement such as Standard Form 312 comes into conflict with the Constitution, it’s clear which one should prevail.

Snowden was on the short list this year for Time Magazine’s “Person of the Year,” though that honor ultimately went to Pope Francis. Yet there is much in common between the two men. The pope earned his accolades for his efforts to bring the Roman Catholic Church back to its first principles. So too Snowden was reminding the United States about its first principles, and questioning whether in our zeal to keep ourselves safe, we had lost sight of them altogether.

There are differences between the two men, of course. Francis rules the Catholic Church and, through the force of his will, can push through change. Snowden, on the other hand, is utterly without power. Whether anything changes is up to us.

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