



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on October 21, 2019

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A Surveillance Story

Permanent Record, by Edward Snowden, New York: Metropolitan Books (Henry Holt and Co.), 2019, 352 pages, hardcover.

In 2013, Edward Snowden's revelations of mass surveillance by the NSA and other government agencies confirmed what many had long suspected: The United States government had — for more than a decade — been building a massive program of surveillance and was using it to spy on all of us. Snowden's 2013 disclosures to journalists revealed much of the apparatus and techniques the government used to build what can only be called the Surveillance State. His new book, *Permanent Record*, picks up where those disclosures left off and reveals even more of the intelligence community's illegal spying activities.



Permanent Record — released on September 17 (Constitution Day) — is surprising in at least two ways. First, it is well written and makes for a compelling and enjoyable read. While many technologists are very capable of writing about technology so long as their audience is other technologists, a technologist who can write in a style that is both informative and enjoyable to the average reader is a rarity. Snowden personifies that rarity. His book is so compelling and readable that it is easy to get lost in it and forget that you are reading. The story almost comes to life for the reader. Second, when Snowden made his initial disclosures, he told journalists, including Laura Poitras and Glenn Greenwald, that he was not the point of the story, the disclosures were the point — this book is a reversal of that position. Before *Permanent Record*, little first-hand information was known about Ed Snowden. *Permanent Record*, by contrast, is a look inside the mind of the man who — by revealing the size and scope of government surveillance — changed the world while remaining largely in the background until now. Beginning with Snowden's childhood and moving forward in chronological order, *Permanent Record* reveals not just *what* Snowden discovered and exposed to the world about illegal, unconstitutional government spying, but *why* he felt compelled to expose it, even at great risk to himself. Ranging from the humorous to the traumatic, *Permanent Record* is both a detailed blow-by-blow of the emergence of the Surveillance State and an intimate self-disclosure of the man who unwittingly helped build it and then — not unlike Dr. Frankenstein — upon discovering that what he helped create was a monster, set out to destroy it.

On that note, Snowden details his “tipping point” moment when he realized that the technology he had helped to create — in the “us vs. them” mind-set of the immediate post-9/11 America — was likely being used against the very Americans he and others in the NSA and CIA (for both of which he had worked as



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a “contractor”) were ostensibly working to protect. “I felt used, as an employee of the [intelligence community] who only now was realizing that all along I’d been protecting not my country but the state.” That “tipping point” moment was born of his realization of a fundamental rule of technology that says that anything that can be done, will be done and is probably already being done. Snowden was working on a presentation for NSA employees about China’s surveillance abilities and activities when he first asked himself the question, “Could the American government be doing this?”

That question led him down a rabbit hole from which — at least for him, with a strong sense of right and wrong where the liberty of the individual is concerned — there was no return. As he advanced into that rabbit hole, he discovered that his fears were well-founded. Not only *could* the American government do it, it *was* doing it. In fact, the goal was to harvest everything that could be harvested about everyone — including American citizens — and store it in perpetuity. That way, anything about anyone could be searched and retrieved whenever it suited the interests of the powers-that-be.

To confirm his suspicions, Snowden used another well-established (if often overlooked) rule of technology: The systems administrator has access to everything. In other words, the IT guy — even if paid less and having less authority than his bosses — is perhaps the most powerful person in the building because he has access to information his bosses probably cannot even access.

As Snowden dug down into the information to which he had legitimate access as part of the responsibilities of his position, he discovered a “litany of American destruction by way of American self-destruction, with the promulgation of secret policies, secret laws, secret courts, and secret wars, whose traumatizing impact — whose very existence — the US government has repeatedly classified, denied, disclaimed, and distorted” and a classified report on the capabilities of government surveillance that made it clear that such capability was being illegally and secretively employed. In fact, the actions of the intelligence community (IC) were being deliberately kept not only from the American people — to whom the IC was ultimately accountable — but also from Congress, to whom the IC was immediately answerable.

In fact, what led Snowden to search for that classified report was his reading of the “declassified version” of it that had been made available to Congress. What he found was that the “declassified version” was nothing of the sort. It was a complete fabrication bearing no resemblance to its “classified” counterpart besides sharing a title. The “declassified” version was problematic in itself. As Snowden wrote:

Another aspect of the report that threw me was its repeated, obscure references to “Other Intelligence Activities” [the capitalization is the report’s] for which no “viable legal rationale” or no “legal basis” could be found beyond President Bush’s claim of executive powers during wartime — a wartime that had no end in sight. Of course, these references gave no description whatsoever of what these Activities might actually be, but the process of deduction pointed to warrantless domestic surveillance, as it was pretty much the only intelligence activity not provided for under the various legal frameworks that appeared subsequent to the PSP [the President’s Surveillance Program, issued by President George W. Bush in the wake of 9/11].

But as bad as the “repeated, obscure references” were, the actual report — which Snowden describes as not “a redaction of the classified version, as would usually be the practice” but “a wholly different document [from the classified version], which the classified version immediately exposed as an outright



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and carefully concocted lie” — “laid out the nature, and scale, of [the] intensification of [the IC’s surveillance].” Snowden explains, “The NSA’s historic brief had been fundamentally altered from targeted collection of communications to ‘bulk collection,’ which is the agency’s euphemism for mass surveillance. And whereas the unclassified version obfuscated this shift, advocating for expanded surveillance by scaring the public with the specter of terror, the classified version made this shift explicit, justifying it as the legitimate corollary of expanded technological capability.”

In other words, since as technology evolves, the capability of surveillance expands, the IC realized that it could capture more and more data on anyone who uses technology. And as Snowden observes, “So many decisions that have been made by technologists in academia, industry, the military, and government since at least the Industrial Revolution have been made on the basis of ‘can we,’ not ‘should we.’” The end result of the intersection of these two ideas is a Surveillance State with capabilities and actions that would have seemed like science fiction to a previous generation.

To make matters worse, the only purpose for collecting all of everyone’s data was to hang on to it “forever,” according to Gus Hunt, who served as the chief intelligence officer for the CIA. Snowden recounts a public Web conference in which Hunt stated, “At the CIA, we fundamentally try to collect everything and hang onto it forever.” As Snowden explains, “As if that wasn’t clear enough, [Gus Hunt] went on: ‘It is nearly within our grasp to compute on *all* human generated information.’ The [emphasis] was Gus’s own. He was reading from his slide deck, ugly words in an ugly font illustrated with the government’s signature four-color clip art.”

This principle of perpetual storage of the data collected from all persons served as the title for Snowden’s book, *Permanent Record*. As he states early on in his book, his is the last generation of Americans (and many other world citizens) whose childhoods would be stored in photo albums and VHS tapes. Every generation born since the advent of Internet storage and Social Media would be part of a “permanent record” from cradle to grave. Whereas previous generations could have chosen to destroy unflattering yearbook pictures, videos, etc., no person born in the age of surveillance can ever make that choice. Period. It is all online — in iCloud, Google Drive, Dropbox, Facebook, and any number of other online platforms and services — and is stored *forever* by the Surveillance State. From childhood to death, it is all in their control.

As to the danger of that “permanent rec-ord,” Snowden writes, “Once the ubiquity of collection was combined with the permanency of storage, all any government had to do was select a person or a group to scapegoat and go searching — as I’d gone searching through the agency’s files — for evidence of a suitable crime.” With massive data centers being built and more to come, the idea of permanency of storage is no pipe dream; it is a reality.

Snowden acknowledges the existence of what this writer has often called the incestuous relationship between the Surveillance State (born of the government) and the Culture of Surveillance (born of the tech industry), writing, “The data we generate just by living — or just by letting ourselves be surveilled while living — would enrich private enterprise and impoverish our private existence in equal measure,” and:

Meanwhile, the private sector was busy leveraging our reliance on technology into market consolidation. The majority of American Internet users lived their entire digital lives on email, social media, and e-commerce platforms owned by an imperial triumvirate of companies (Google, Facebook,



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and Amazon), and the American IC was seeking to take advantage of that fact by obtaining access to their networks — both through direct orders that were kept secret from the public, and clandestine subversion efforts that were kept secret from the companies themselves. Our user data was turning vast profits for the companies, and the government pilfered it for free.

Revisiting the idea of technological evolution, Snowden reflects that the data-gathering capabilities of the Surveillance State are far beyond those employed by previous totalitarian regimes. “A single current-model smartphone commands more computing power than all of the wartime machinery of the Reich and the Soviet Union combined. Recalling this is the surest way to contextualize not just the modern American IC’s technological dominance, but also the threat it poses to democratic governance. In the century or so since [the census efforts of those totalitarian regimes, which they used to consolidate control over the people], technology has made astounding progress, but the same could not be said for the law or human scruples that could restrain it.” With tech platforms and services collecting vast amounts of data about every aspect of the lives of those who use them and government helping itself to that data and then storing it in perpetuity, the prospect of Total Government requires no stretch of the imagination. Its nucleolus is here and now.

While these realizations were keeping Snowden awake nights and driving him to a desire to act, he had two sirens attempting to sing him back to sleep: the immediate responsibilities of his job and the apathy of his fellow Americans. He writes, “Life took over and I had work to do. When you get asked to give recommendations on how to keep IC agents and assets from being uncovered and executed by the Chinese Ministry of State Security, it’s hard to remember what you were Googling the week before,” and “I wondered what the point was of my getting so worked up over government surveillance if my friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens were more than happy to invite corporate surveillance into their homes.”

Thank God, in the end higher principles won out. On the first point, Snowden realized that empowering the State to dominate the people was antithetical to the right reason for government — the protection of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. On the second point, he realized that his fellow Americans had bought a lie because they had been sold a lie. He wrote of those who shrug off mass surveillance, “Ultimately, saying that you don’t care about privacy because you have nothing to hide is no different from saying you don’t care about freedom of speech because you have nothing to say.”

In the final summation, while *Permanent Record* is not perfect — Snowden’s morality, while getting some things right, gets other things wrong, and he often conflates “democracy” with the correct understanding of a republican form of government — it is still very good and well worth the read.

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