

Dark Mirror:
Edward Snowden
and the American
Surveillance State
by Barton Gellman
The Bodley Head,
£20

Permanent Record
by Edward Snowden
Macmillan, £20

The man who exposed the watchers

David J. Garrow

E DWARD SNOWDEN revealed himself to the world, via a *Guardian* web-video, on 9 June 2013, four days after the *Guardian*, and then the *Washington Post*, first reported on the astonishing treasure trove of top-secret US intelligence community documents they had been given by the 29-year-old computer systems engineer who worked at the National Security Agency's (NSA) Hawaii listening post. In close collaboration with the UK's GCHQ, and the other three members of the "Five Eyes" international surveillance network — Canada, Australia, and New Zealand — the NSA had siphoned off massive amounts of user data from Google, Facebook, Microsoft and other tech platforms through a secret programme called Prism.

A high school dropout notwithstanding a genius-level IQ score, Snowden had quit US Special Forces training after breaking both of his legs. But having earned a Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer credential at 19, Snowden parlayed that door-opener into an entry-level post at NSA and easily obtained a beyond-Top Secret SCI — "Sensitive Compartmented Information" security clearance.

Jobs with the CIA and high-paying government contractors such as Dell and Booz Allen soon followed, but by 2012, as the sole staffer at the ironically-named Office of Information Sharing, Snowden was experiencing deep disquiet with the NSA's work. In the wake of 9/11, he had been a gung-ho recruit in President George W. Bush's "war on terror," but by the early years of Barack Obama's presidency, as the ostensibly progressive chief executive time and again "rebranded and re-certified" Bush's far-reaching surveillance programmes, Snowden and his partner, Lindsay Mills, came to realise that their hopes for Obama were proving "more and more misplaced".

SNOWDEN'S POST AS "the manager of document management at one of NSA's most significant facilities" gave him "as much time to read as I

wanted", and the more he learned about NSA's ubiquitous international surveillance programmes, the more troubled he became. "A system of global mass surveillance," he realised, produces "a permanent record of everyone's life," and indeed that was the intelligence agencies' professed goal. "The value of any piece of information is only known when you can connect it with something else that arrives at a future point in time," CIA chief technical officer Gus Hunt explained in early 2013. "Since you can't connect dots you don't have, it drives us into a mode of, we fundamentally try to collect everything and hang onto it forever."

By that time, Snowden had resolved to act, but his initial anonymous messages to radical journalist Glenn Greenwald went unanswered. Progressive filmmaker Laura Poitras did respond, and she in turn contacted both former *Washington Post* reporter Bart Gellman, a well-known national security journalist, and Greenwald. By mid-May Poitras and Gellman had convinced the still-anonymous Snowden of their interest, and on 19 May, having taken medical leave from his job, Snowden paid cash for a one-way flight to Tokyo, where he then bought one to Hong Kong.

Simultaneously, he made his huge electronic archive of thousands of NSA documents available to Poitras and Gellman. In his cover note, he told them that "My sole motive is to inform the public as to that which is done in their name and that which is done against them," outside the US as well as within. The Five Eyes "have inflicted upon the world a system of secret, pervasive surveillance from which there is no refuge".

Snowden wanted the duo to fly to Hong Kong for an in-person debriefing, but Gellman got professional cold feet over Snowden's request that the ensuing story be published in such a way as to facilitate Snowden's hope of obtaining political asylum from the left-wing government of Ecuador. Holed up day after day in room 1014 of Hong Kong's Mira Hotel and subsisting on room-service food, Snowden lived in quiet terror until Poitras and Greenwald, soon joined by the veteran *Guardian* journalist Ewen MacAskill, finally arrived on 2 June.

ONCE SNOWDEN'S IDENTITY became public on 9 June, he fled his hotel for a pair of secret home-stays with humble clients of a local immigration lawyer. US prosecutors sought his extradition, but through the good efforts of Wikileaks' Sarah Harrison and Ecuador's UK consul, on 21 June Snowden set out on a four-leg flight plan to Quito via Moscow, Havana and Caracas. Before

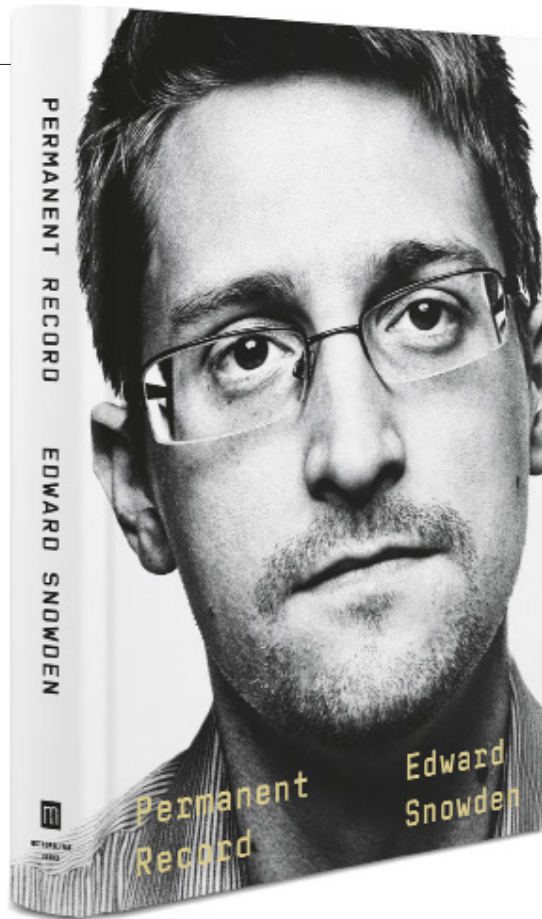
leaving, “I wiped my four laptops completely clean and destroyed the cryptographic key” to his NSA materials, “which meant that I could no longer access any of the documents even if compelled”.

UPON ARRIVING AT MOSCOW’S Sheremetyevo airport, Russian FSB security officers informed Snowden that he could not fly onward to Havana because the US government had cancelled his passport. “I was incredulous: my own government had trapped me in Russia,” and the FSB offered its assistance: “Life for a person in your situation can be very difficult without friends who can help,” the top officer volunteered. “If there is some information, perhaps, some small thing you could share with us?”

Snowden politely declined, but he was stranded at the airport, albeit with full internet access. Yet a grand total of 27 asylum requests went for naught, and on 1 August Snowden reluctantly accepted temporary asylum in Russia.

Only four months later did Barton Gellman make the first of two trips to Moscow to finally meet and interview Snowden. As Gellman had dug deeper into the Snowden archive, publishing an ongoing series of revelatory articles in the *Post*, he had come to realise even more fully just how inclusive Snowden’s reach had been. Through his “Privileged Access” status, Snowden “had the highest-tier privileges as a system administrator” and “held valid credentials to read, write, copy, or delete just about any document”. In addition, “he could disable, edit, or erase some of the activity logs that would otherwise leave evidence of his digital movements”.

During 14 hours together over the course of two full days, Gellman realised that “Snowden was truly reluctant to talk about himself” but listened carefully to a sophisticated, albeit radical thinker. “I believe our Constitution protects everybody, not just citizens” of the US, Snowden stated. The Declaration of Independence “does not declare that ‘all US persons are created equal,’ does it? [Indeed it says “all men.”] Much of my reasoning follows from that,” Snowden explained, adding that the “probable cause” standard required for domestic judicial warrants should apply even to foreign intelligence targeting, a truly remarkable



Gellman rightly judges Snowden’s cumulative disclosures as “the most consequential leak in the history of US intelligence”

David J. Garrow’s books include *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1981), *Bearing the Cross* (1986), a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of King, and *Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama* (2017)

“world citizen’s” view.

But Gellman concluded that “when it came to nonsubjective information,” Snowden “was dependably careful”. And despite living in a completely unexpected and foreign exile — “I never thought I would end up in Russia,” he said — Gellman also realised that Snowden was both happy and wholly at peace with everything that had transpired. “The fact I’m walking free today, the fact that I’m still able to communicate with you, it shows that . . . there are circumstances where if you do things right, if you do things carefully, you can win . . . You can beat them.”

What’s more, “one of the very interesting things about doing the right thing is you have no trouble sleeping.” Indeed, “for me, in terms of personal satisfaction and accomplishing the mission, the mission’s accomplished. I already won . . . I got everything I wanted,” Snowden told Gellman. “Really, my work is done. I feel that in a large way, my life’s work

is completed . . . If something terrible happens to me and I disappear, don’t shed a tear for me.”

ONLY SEVERAL YEARS LATER would Gellman fully appreciate just how perspicacious Snowden could be. In late 2013, Snowden hypothesised out loud about the dangers that comprehensive electronic surveillance created. “What if I had been a real political partisan . . . and collected every Democratic official’s emails between now and the election coming up . . . and leaked them out as the new October surprise?” he asked. As Gellman, and millions more, would realise in the wake of the 2016 US election, “Snowden saw the potential before it happened.”

Snowden further believed that by sharing his materials with experienced journalists, rather than releasing them en masse, “I did what I could to maximise what was in the public interest and minimise what would cause harm.” Gellman felt similarly, since “some of the NSA archive, I strongly believed, should not see the light of day,” given what it revealed about programmes and methods rightly targeting dangerous terrorist groups and renegade state actors.

Editors at the *Guardian* and the *Post* agreed, and Gellman does not shy from stating that “there were many times . . . when it was possible to re-

move details” that knowledgeable government officials believed would do gratuitous damage “without undercutting the news value of a story”.

Gellman rightly judges Snowden’s cumulative disclosures as “the most consequential leak in the history of US intelligence”, and in *Dark Mirror*, his compulsively readable autobiographical history of the episode, he quotes former US FBI director James Comey as opining that “the world changed as a result of Edward Snowden, in a significant way”. Gellman writes that Snowden “gave life to a vital public debate about the boundaries of secret intelligence in a free society” and “brought about legal, diplomatic, political and legislative challenges to the prevailing model at the NSA” and its sister agencies abroad.

Most significant was the “greater resistance in the private sector against NSA bulk surveillance practices” on the part of tech companies which government programmes had plundered. “I think Snowden did substantially more good than harm,” Gellman concludes, and while his revelations “shifted popular culture,” Gellman nonetheless opines that “US law and society” — and that of the other Five Eyes countries too — “have yet to adapt fundamentally to what he revealed.”

WHEN EDWARD SNOWDEN’S own memoir, *Permanent Record*, first appeared in late 2019,

some ambivalent critics mocked him for thanking his novelist friend Joshua Cohen for “helping to transform my rambling reminiscences and capsule manifestos into a book that I hope he can be proud of”. Yet significant assistance to ostensible sole authors has become more than commonplace in today’s world, and Barton Gellman takes good manners yet a step further by including on *Dark Mirror’s* very title page, as almost a co-author, “Research Assistant Ashkan Soltani”. Indeed Gellman’s extensive endnotes, irrespective of who oversaw their creation, are so impressively comprehensive as to put many academics to shame.

Edward Snowden and Lindsay Mills may indeed be happy in Moscow — they married there in 2017 — but it nonetheless remains sadly ironic that such a self-sacrificingly courageous figure remains trapped in Vladimir Putin’s murderously dangerous dictatorship. The US government has moved to seize whatever proceeds Snowden may reap from *Permanent Record*, but in *Dark Mirror* Bart Gellman firmly cautions that a darker prospect is on the US — and UK’s — immediate horizon.

If Wikileaks’ Julian Assange is successfully extradited from the UK — a decision presently on hold until September — and then convicted of Espionage Act charges in the US, “the climate for investigative journalism on national security will change pretty starkly”, Gellman warns. ☹

Britain’s little Hitlers

Richard Griffiths

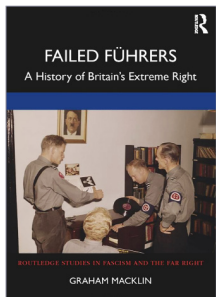
COMMENTING ON the temporary nature of his party’s occasional electoral successes, Nick Griffin, leader of the British National Party (BNP), once described them as being like “a cross between the Charge of the Light Brigade and a very expensive Chinese meal — one fart and it’s gone”. The story of the British extreme right, as told in *Failed Führers*, is, as the title suggests, one of perpetual disappointment, only lightened by occasional, fleeting moments of comparative success.

Just why was the British right such a failure, compared with some of its continental counterparts? This book goes a long way towards answering that question. Its author, Graham Macklin, is

already known for a stimulating study, *Very Deeply Dyed in Black* (2007), which dealt with Sir Oswald Mosley’s attempts to resurrect British fascism after 1945. Here, he extends that field to include all the major aspects of the British extreme right from 1945 to the present day. He does so in the form of a series of biographical studies of some of the major figures involved.

The sub-title of the book, “A History of Britain’s Extreme Right”, is slightly misleading, in that, when it comes to the pre-war right, only certain aspects are examined — those which have relevance to what happened after 1945. It is thus that the whole of a major early chapter is devoted to the “anti-Jewish camel-doctor” Arnold Leese, head of the Imperial Fascist League (described by Mosley as “one of those crank little societies, mad about the Jews, a ridiculous and futile body”, whose leader was “absolutely certifiable”).

When we realise, however, the extent to which Leese was admired by certain major post-1945 figures, the reason for his inclusion, as opposed to that of many apparently more deserving pre-war figures, is explained. What it also, incidentally, illustrates is the unreality, extremism and eccen-



Failed Führers:
A History of
Britain’s Extreme
Right
By Graham Macklin
Routledge, £24.99
(paperback)