The Inside Story of the World's Most Wanted Man

LUKE HARDING



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Foreword

Edward Snowden is one of the most extraordinary whistleblowers in history. Never before has anyone scooped up en masse the top-secret files of the world's most powerful intelligence organisations, in order to make them public. But that was what he did.

His skills are unprecedented. Until the present generation of computer nerds came along, no one realised it was possible to make off with the electronic equivalent of whole libraries full of triple-locked filing cabinets and safes – thousands of documents and millions of words.

His motives are remarkable. Snowden set out to expose the true behaviour of the US National Security Agency and its allies. On present evidence, he has no interest in money – although he could have sold his documents to foreign intelligence services for many, many millions. Nor does he have the kind of left-wing or Marxist sentiments which could lead to him being depicted as unAmerican. On the contrary, he is an enthusiast for the American constitution, and, like other fellow 'hacktivists', is a devotee of libertarian politician Ron Paul, whose views are well to the right of many Republicans.

What Snowden has revealed is important. His files show that the methods of the intelligence agencies that

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carry out electronic eavesdropping have spiralled out of control, largely thanks to the political panic in the US which followed the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Let off the legal leash and urged to make America safe, the NSA and its British junior partner, the Government Communications Headquarters, GCHQ (secretly allied with the internet and telecommunications giants who control the hardware), have used all their technical skills to 'master the internet'. That is their phrase, not ours. Democratic control has been vague, smothered in secrecy and plainly inadequate.

The result has been a world that is spied on. The technologies that the west has trumpeted as forces for individual freedom and democracy – Google, Skype, mobile phones, GPS, YouTube, Tor, e-commerce, internet banking and all the rest – are turning into machines for surveillance that would have astonished George Orwell, the author of 1984.

The *Guardian* was, I am glad to say, first among the free press to publish Snowden's revelations. We saw it as our duty to break the taboos of secrecy, with due regard, as Snowden himself wanted, to the safety of individuals and the protection of genuinely sensitive intelligence material.

I am proud we did so: fierce debate and demands for reform have been now launched across the world – in the US itself, in Germany, France, Brazil, Indonesia, Canada, Australia, even in deferential Britain. The *Guardian* was eventually forced to publish from the safety of its New York division, because of British legal harassment. I think

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that readers of this book might well see the value of introducing a UK equivalent to the first amendment of the US constitution, which protects the freedom of the press. It is a freedom that can protect us all.

Alan Rusbridger Editor-in-chief, *Guardian* London, February 2014

Prologue: The Rendezvous

Mira Hotel, Nathan Road, Hong Kong Monday 3 June 2013

'I don't want to live in a world where everything that I say, everything I do, everyone I talk to, every expression of creativity or love or friendship is recorded ...'

EDWARD SNOWDEN

It began with an email.

'I am a senior member of the intelligence community ...'

No name, no job title, no details. The *Guardian* columnist Glenn Greenwald, who was based in Brazil, started to correspond with this mysterious source. Who was he? The source said nothing about himself. He was an intangible presence, an online ghost. Possibly even a fiction.

After all, how could it be real? There had never before been a big leak out of the National Security Agency. Everybody knew that America's foremost intelligence-gathering organisation, based at Fort Meade near Washington DC, was impregnable. What the NSA did was a secret. Nothing got out. 'NSA, No Such Agency', as the Beltway wits had it.

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Yet this strange person did appear to have access to some remarkable top-secret documents. The source was sending Greenwald a sample of highly classified NSA files, dangling them in front of his nose. How the ghost purloined them with such apparent ease was a mystery. Assuming they were genuine, they appeared to blow the lid off a story of global importance. They suggested the White House wasn't just spying on its enemies (bad guys, al-Qaida, terrorists, the Russians), or even on its supposed allies (Germany, France), but on the communications of millions of private US citizens.

Joined with the US in this mass snooping exercise was the UK. The NSA's British counterpart, GCHQ, was based deep in the English countryside. The UK and USA had a close intelligence-sharing relationship dating back to the second world war. To the uncharitable, Britain was the US's reliable poodle. Alarmingly, the documents revealed that the NSA was stumping up millions of dollars for British surveillance activities.

And now Greenwald was about to meet his Deep Throat. Promising further disclosures, the source was summoning him to fly from his home in Rio de Janeiro to Hong Kong, run by communist China and thousands of miles away. Greenwald felt the location was 'bizarre' and confusing: did he have a senior foreign posting there?

The rendezvous was to be in Kowloon's Mira Hotel, a chic, modern edifice in the heart of the tourist district, and a short cab ride away from the Star Ferry to Hong Kong Island. Accompanying Greenwald was

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Laura Poitras, also an American citizen, documentary film-maker and notable thorn in the side of the US military. She had been a matchmaker, the first to point Greenwald in the ghost's direction.

The two journalists were given meticulous instructions. They were to meet in a less-trafficked, but not entirely obscure, part of the hotel, next to a large plastic alligator. They would swap pre-agreed phrases. The source would carry a Rubik's cube. Oh, and his name was Edward Snowden.

It appeared the mystery interlocutor was an experienced spy. Perhaps one with a flair for the dramatic. Everything Greenwald knew about him pointed in one direction: that he was a grizzled veteran of the intelligence community. 'I thought he must be a pretty senior bureaucrat,' Greenwald says. Probably 60-odd, wearing a blue blazer with shiny gold buttons, receding grey hair, sensible black shoes, spectacles, a club tie ... Greenwald could visualise him already. Perhaps he was the CIA's station chief in Hong Kong; the mission was down the road.

This theory, mistaken as it was, was based on two clues: the very privileged level of top-secret access the source appeared to enjoy, and the sophistication of his political analysis. With the very first batch of secrets the source had sent a personal manifesto. It offered his motive – to reveal the extent of what he regarded as the 'suspicion-less' surveillance state. It claimed the technology to spy on people had run way beyond the law. Meaningful oversight had become impossible.

The scale of the NSA's ambition was extraordinary, the source said. Over the past decade the volume of digital information coursing between continents had increased. Exploded, even. Against this backdrop the agency had drifted from its original mission of foreign intelligence gathering. Now, it was collecting data on everybody. And storing it. This included data from both the US and abroad. The NSA was secretly engaged in nothing less than electronic mass observation. Or so the source had said.

The pair reached the alligator ahead of schedule. They sat down. They waited. Greenwald briefly pondered whether the alligator had some significance in Chinese culture. He wasn't sure. Nothing happened. The source didn't show. Strange.

If the initial meeting failed, the plan was to return later the same morning to the same anonymous corridor, running between the Mira's glitzy internal shopping mall and one of its restaurants. Greenwald and Poitras came back. They waited for a second time.

And then they saw him – a pale, spindle-limbed, nervous, preposterously young man. In Greenwald's shocked view, he was barely old enough to shave. He was dressed in a white T-shirt and jeans. In his right hand he was carrying a scrambled Rubik's cube. Had there been a mistake? 'He looked like he was 23. I was completely discombobulated. None of it made sense,' Greenwald says.

The young man – if indeed he were the source – had sent encrypted instructions as to how the initial verification would proceed:

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POITRAS: What time does the restaurant open?

THE SOURCE: At noon. But don't go there, the food sucks ...

The exchange was faintly comic. Greenwald – nervous – said his lines, struggling to keep a straight face.

Snowden then said simply: 'Follow me.' The three walked silently towards the lift. No one else was around – or, at least, nobody they could see. They rode to the first floor, and followed the cube-man to room 1014. He opened the door with his swipe card, and they entered. 'I went with it,' Greenwald says.

It was already a weird mission. But now it had acquired the feel of a wild-goose chase. This thin-framed student type was surely too callow to have access to super-sensitive material? Optimistically, Greenwald speculated that possibly he was the son of the source, or his personal assistant. If not, then the encounter was a waste of time, a hoax of Jules Verne proportions.

Poitras, too, had been secretly communicating with the source for four months. She felt she knew him – or at least the online version of him. She was also struggling to adjust. 'I nearly fainted when I saw how old he was. It took me 24 hours to rewire my brain.'

Over the course of the day, however, Snowden told his story. He was, he said, a 29-year-old contractor with the National Security Agency. He had been based at the NSA's regional operations centre in Kunia on the Pacific island of Hawaii. Two weeks ago he had quit his job, effectively abandoned and bid farewell to his girlfriend,

and secretly boarded a flight to Hong Kong. He had taken with him four laptops.

The laptops were heavily encrypted. But from them Snowden had access to documents taken from NSA and GCHQ's internal servers. Tens of thousands of documents, in fact. Most were stamped 'Top Secret'. Some were marked 'Top Secret Strap 1' – the British higher tier of super-classification for intercept material – or even 'Strap 2', which was almost as secret as you could get. No one – apart from a restricted circle of security officials – had ever seen documents of this kind before. What he was carrying, Snowden indicated, was the biggest intelligence leak in history.

Greenwald noticed the accumulated debris of many days of room service – trays, abandoned bowls of noodles, dirty cutlery. Snowden said he had ventured out just three times since checking into the Mira under his own name a fortnight earlier. He sat on the bed as Greenwald bombarded him with questions: where did you work, who was your boss in the CIA, why? Greenwald's credibility was on the line. So was that of his editors at the *Guardian*. Yet if Snowden were genuine, at any moment a CIA SWAT team could burst into the room, confiscate his laptops, and drag him away.

Snowden, they began to feel certain, was no fake. His information could well be real. And his reasons for becoming a whistleblower were cogent, too. His job as a systems administrator meant – he explained lucidly, persuasively, coolly – that he had a rare overview of the

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NSA's extraordinary surveillance capacities, that he could see the dark places where the agency was going.

The NSA could bug 'anyone', from the president downwards, he said. In theory the spy agency was supposed to collect only signals intelligence on foreign targets, known as SIGINT. In practice this was a joke, Snowden told Greenwald: it was already hoovering up metadata from millions of Americans. Phone records, email headers, subject lines, seized without acknowledgement or consent. From this you could construct a complete electronic narrative of an individual's life – their friends, their lovers, their joys, their sorrows.

Together with GCHQ, the NSA had secretly attached intercepts to the undersea fibre-optic cables that ringed the world. This allowed the US and UK to read much of the globe's communications. Secret courts were compelling telecoms providers to hand over data. What's more, pretty much all of Silicon Valley was involved with the NSA, Snowden said – Google, Microsoft, Facebook, even Steve Jobs's Apple. The NSA claimed it had 'direct access' to the tech giants' servers.

While giving themselves unprecedented surveillance powers, the US intelligence community was concealing the truth about its activities, Snowden said. If James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, had deliberately lied to Congress about the NSA's programs, he had committed a felony. The NSA was flagrantly violating the US constitution and the right to privacy. It had even put secret back doors into online encryption software – used

to make secure bank payments – weakening the system for everybody.

As Snowden told the story, the NSA's behaviour seemed culled from 20th-century dystopian fiction. It was recognisable from the writings of Aldous Huxley or George Orwell. But the NSA's ultimate goal seemed to go even further: to collect everything from everybody, everywhere and to store it indefinitely. It signalled a turning point. It looked like the extirpation of privacy. The spy agencies had hijacked the internet – once a platform for individuality and self-expression. Snowden used the word 'panopticon'. This was a significant coinage by the 18th-century British philosopher and codifier Jeremy Bentham. It described an ingenious circular jail where the warders could see the prisoners at all times, without their knowing if they were being observed.

And this, Snowden asserted, was why he had decided to go public. To throw away his life and career. He told Greenwald he didn't want to live in a world 'where everything that I say, everything that I do, everyone I talk to, every expression of love or friendship is recorded'.

Over the coming weeks, Snowden's claims would ignite an epochal debate. They would enrage the White House and Downing Street. And they would cause international havoc, as Snowden slipped out of Hong Kong, attempted to gain asylum in Latin America, and got stuck in Vladimir Putin's Moscow.

In America and Europe (though not at first in the Britain of James Bond), there was a spirited argument about the right balance between security and civil liberties,

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between freedom of speech and privacy. Despite the febrile polarisation of US politics, right-wing libertarians and left-wing Democrats joined together to support Snowden. Even President Obama conceded the debate was overdue and reform was required. Though this didn't stop US authorities from cancelling Snowden's passport, charging him with espionage and demanding his return from Russia.

The fight to publish Snowden's story was to present the journalists themselves with dramatic problems – legal, logistical, editorial. It pitted a famous newspaper, its global website and a few media allies against some of the most powerful people on the planet. And it would lead to the destruction of the *Guardian*'s computer hard drives in an underground basement, watched over by two British GCHQ boffins. The machine-smashing was to be a particularly surreal episode in the history of western journalism and its battles against the state.

As he sat in his Hong Kong hotel room, throwing the switch to launch all this, Snowden was calm. According to Greenwald, he was convinced of the rightness of his actions, intellectually, emotionally and psychologically. In the aftermath of his leaks, Snowden recognised imprisonment would surely follow. But during that momentous summer he radiated a sense of tranquility and equanimity. He had reached a rock-like place of inner certainty. Here, nothing could touch him.

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TheTrueHOOHA

Ellicott City, near Baltimore
December 2001

'Nothing at last is sacred but the integrity of one's own mind.'

RALPH WALDO EMERSON,

'Self-Reliance', Essays: First Series

In late December 2001, someone calling themselves 'TheTrueHOOHA' had a question. TheTrueHOOHA was an 18-year-old American male, an avid gamer, with impressive IT skills and a sharp intelligence. His real identity was unknown. But then everyone who posted on Ars Technica, a popular technology website, did so anonymously. Most contributors were young men. All were passionately attached to the internet.

The True HOOHA wanted tips on how to set up his own web server. It was a Saturday morning, a little after 11am local time. He posted: 'It's my first time. Be gentle. Here's my dilemma: I want to be my own host. What do I need?'

Soon Ars's regular users were piling in with helpful suggestions. Hosting your own web server wasn't a big deal, but did require a Pentium 200 computer, at least, plenty of memory and decent bandwidth.

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TheTrueHOOHA liked these answers. He replied: 'Ah, the vast treasury of geek knowledge that is Ars.' At 2am he was still online (albeit rather tired: 'Yawn. Bedtime, gotta rise up early for more geek stuff tomorrow, ya know,' he wrote).

The True HOOHA may have been an Ars novice. But his replies were fluent and self-assured. 'If I sound like a belligerent, self-important, 18-year-old upstart with no respect for his elders, you are probably onto something,' he typed. He took a dim view of his teachers, apparently, writing: 'Community colleges don't have the brightest professors, you know.'

The True HOOHA would become a prolific Ars contributor. Over the next eight years he authored nearly 800 comments. He chatted frequently on other forums, too, especially #arsificial. Who was he? He appeared to do a wide variety of jobs; he described himself variously as 'unemployed', a failed soldier, a 'systems editor', and someone who had US State Department security clearance.

Was there a touch of Walter Mitty? His home was on the east coast of America in the state of Maryland, near Washington DC. But by his mid-twenties he was already an international man of mystery. He popped up in Europe – in Geneva, London, Ireland (a nice place, apparently, apart from the 'socialism problem'), Italy and Bosnia. He travelled to India.

TheTrueHOOHA kept mum about what exactly he did. But there were clues. Despite having no degree, he knew an astonishing amount about computers, and seemed to spend most of his life online. Something of an

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autodidact, then. His politics appeared staunchly Republican. He believed strongly in personal liberty, defending, for example, Australians who farmed cannabis plants.

At times he could be rather obnoxious. He told one fellow-Arsian, for example, that he was a 'cock'; others who disagreed with his sink-or-swim views on social security were 'fucking retards'. Even by the free-for-all standards of chat rooms – much like a bar where anybody could pull up a stool – TheTrueHOOHA was an opinionated kind of guy.

Other users never learned TheTrueHOOHA's off-screen name. They did glimpse what he looked like, though. In April 2006, a couple of months shy of his 23rd birthday, TheTrueHOOHA posted photos of himself, taken at an amateur modelling shoot. They show a handsome young man, with pale skin and delicately bruised eyes, somewhat vampiric in appearance, staring moodily into the camera. In one shot, he wears a strange leather bracelet.

'Cute,' one user posted. 'No love for the wristband eh?' TheTrueHOOHA queried, when someone said he looked gay. He insisted he was heterosexual. And added casually: 'My girlfriend is a photographer.'

TheTrueHOOHA's chat logs cover a colourful array of themes: gaming, girls, sex, Japan, the stock market, his disastrous stint in the US army, his impressions of multi-racial Britain, the joys of gun ownership. ('I have a Walther P22. It's my only gun but I love it to death,' he wrote in 2006.) In their own way, the logs form a *Bildungsroman*, a novel of youthful experience, written

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by someone from the first generation that grew up with the internet.

Then in 2009 the entries fizzle away. Something happens. The early exuberance disappears; the few last posts are dark and brooding. An edge of bitterness creeps in. In February 2010 he makes one of his final posts. TheTrueHOOHA mentions a thing that troubles him: pervasive government surveillance. He writes:

Society really seems to have developed an unquestioning obedience towards spooky types.

I wonder how well would envelopes that became transparent under magical federal candle-light have sold in 1750? 1800? 1850? 1900? 1950? Did we get to where we are today via a slippery slope that was entirely within our control to stop? Or was it a relatively instantaneous sea change that sneaked in undetected because of pervasive government secrecy?

TheTrueHOOHA's last post is on 21 May 2012. After that he disappears, a lost electronic signature amid the vastness of cyberspace. But a year later, as we now know, TheTrueHOOHA, aka Edward Snowden, travels to Hong Kong.

Edward Joseph Snowden was born on 21 June 1983. Friends know him as 'Ed'. His father Lonnie Snowden and mother Elizabeth – known as Wendy – were high-school sweethearts who married at 18. Lon was an officer

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in the US coast guard; Snowden spent his early years in Elizabeth City, along North Carolina's coast, where the coast guard has its biggest air and naval base. He has an older sister, Jessica. Like other members of the US forces, Snowden Snr has strong patriotic views. He is a conservative. And a libertarian.

But he is also a thoughtful conservative. Snowden's father is articulate, well-read and quotes the works of the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, who advocated a man adhering to his own principles against the dictates of a corrupt state. On joining the coast guard, Lon Snowden swore an oath to uphold the US constitution and the Bill of Rights. He meant it. For him the oath was not just a series of empty phrases: it underpinned the solemn American contract between a citizen and the state.

When Snowden was small – a boy with thick blond hair and a toothy smile – he and his family moved to Maryland, within DC's commuter belt. Snowden went to primary and middle schools in Crofton, Anne Arundel County, a town of pleasant villas between DC and Baltimore. Neither of Snowden's former schools is visually alluring; both look like windowless brick bunkers. (The first, at least, has a garden with shrubs, butterflies and a stand-alone plane tree next to the car park.) In his mid-teens, Snowden moved on to nearby Arundel High, which he attended for one and a half years.

As his father recalls, Snowden's education went wrong when he fell ill, probably with glandular fever. He missed 'four or five months' of class. Another factor hurt his studies: his parents were drifting apart. Their troubled

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marriage was on its last legs, and he failed to finish high school. In 1999, aged 16, Snowden enrolled at Anne Arundel Community College. The college's sprawling campus boasts baseball and football stadiums and the sporting motto: 'You can't hide that wildcat pride.'

Snowden took computer courses, and later earned his GED (General Educational Development), a high-school diploma equivalent. But his failure to complete high school would be a source of lingering embarrassment and defensiveness. In February 2001, Snowden's mother filed for divorce. It came through three months later.

In the aftermath of this messy break-up, Snowden lived with a room-mate, and then with his mother, in Ellicott City, just west of Baltimore. His mother's home is situated in a self-contained housing development named Woodland Village, with its own swimming pool and tennis court. Her grey two-storey town house is next to a grassy slope. There is a children's playground; geraniums and hostas grow in the yards; middle-aged ladies can be seen walking large, glossy dogs. It is a friendly place. Neighbours recall seeing Snowden through the open curtains, usually at work on his computer.

The town in which they lived was named after Andrew Ellicott, a Quaker who emigrated from England in 1730. In the late 18th century, Ellicott City was a prosperous place, with flour mills on the east bank of the river, and sturdy houses of dark local granite. There was even a British cannon. Baltimore, with its port, was nearby. By the 21st century, the mills were long gone, or turned

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into heritage sites. In some cases they had been literally washed away. The main local employer in Maryland now was the federal government. Washington DC was a short commute away.

Snowden grew up under the giant shadow of one government agency in particular. From his mother's front door it takes 15 minutes to drive there. Half way between Washington and Baltimore, the agency is strictly off limits. It clearly has a secret function. Half-hidden by trees is a giant green cube-shaped building. Curious antennae dot the roof. There is an enormous car park, a vast power station and a white, golf ball-like radome. Inside are satellite dishes. There are electrified fences and an atmosphere of heavy-duty security. An entrance sign off the Baltimore–Washington Parkway reads: 'NSA next right. Employees only.'

This discreet metropolis is the headquarters of the National Security Agency (NSA), the US's foreign signals spying organisation since 1952. As a teenager, Snowden knew all about the NSA. His college was practically next door. Many of his mother's neighbours worked there. They set off by car every morning, through rolling green Maryland countryside, returning from the 1,000-acre complex at Fort Meade every evening. The Puzzle Palace, or SIGINT city, as it is known, employs 40,000 people. It is the largest hirer of mathematicians in the United States.

For Snowden, however, the likelihood of joining this crepuscular government world was remote. In his early twenties, his focus was on computers more generally. To

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him, the internet was 'the most important invention in all human history'. He chatted online to people 'with all sorts of views that I would never have encountered on my own'. He spent days surfing the net and playing Tekken, a Japanese role-play game. He wasn't only a nerd: he kept fit, practised kung fu and, according to one entry on Ars, 'dated Asian girls'.

But he recognised that this didn't really add up to much of a career. In 2003, he posts: 'I'm an MCSE [Microsoft Certified Solutions Expert] without degree or clearance who lives in Maryland. Read that as unemployed.'

Snowden's father, meanwhile, had moved to Pennsylvania. He was about to re-marry.

The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq prompted Snowden to think seriously about a career in the military. Like his father – who ended up spending three decades in the US coast guard – Snowden says he had the urge to serve his country. 'I wanted to fight in the Iraq war because I felt like I had an obligation as a human being to help free people from oppression.' His motives seem idealistic, and in line with President George W Bush's then-stated goals for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

Snowden thought about joining the US special forces. The military offered what seemed, on the face of it, an attractive scheme, whereby recruits with no prior experience could try out to become elite soldiers. In May 2004 he took the plunge and enlisted. He reported to Fort Benning in Georgia, a large US military camp. The scheme meant eight to 10 weeks' basic training, then an

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advanced infantry course. Finally there was an assessment of suitability for special forces.

His spell in the US military was a disaster. Snowden was in good physical shape but an improbable soldier. He was short-sighted, with -6.50/-6.25 vision. ('My visual acuity ends at about four inches from my eyes, and my optometrist always has a good laugh at me,' he posted.) He also had unusually narrow feet. 'It took 45 minutes for the civilians in Ft. Benning to find combat boots that would fit me,' he tells Ars – an episode that ended in an unpleasant reprimand from his drill sergeant.

Few of his new army colleagues, he maintained, shared his sense of noble purpose, or his desire to help oppressed citizens throw off their chains. Instead, his superiors merely wanted to shoot people. Preferably Muslims. 'Most of the people training us seemed pumped up about killing Arabs, not helping anyone,' he says.

Then during infantry training he broke both his legs. After more than a month's uncertainty, the army finally discharged him.

Back in Maryland, he got a job as a 'security specialist' at the University for Maryland's Center for Advanced Study of Language. It was 2005. (He appears to have begun as a security guard, but then moved back into IT.) Snowden was working at a covert NSA facility on the university's campus. Thanks perhaps to his brief military history, he had broken into the world of US intelligence, albeit on a low rung. The Center worked closely with the US intelligence community – or IC as it styled itself – providing advanced language training.

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Snowden may have lacked a degree, but in mid-2006 he landed a job in information technology at the CIA. He was rapidly learning that his exceptional IT skills opened all kinds of interesting government doors. 'First off, the degree thing is crap, at least domestically. If you "really" have 10 years of solid, provable IT experience ... you CAN get a very well-paying IT job,' he writes in July 2006. 'I have no degree, nor even a high school diploma, but I'm making much more than what they're paying you even though I'm only claiming six years of experience. It's tough to "break in", but once you land a "real" position, you're made.'

Snowden had figured out that US government service offered exciting possibilities including foreign travel and generous perks. You didn't need to be James Bond – merely apply for a 'standard IT specialist position'. He describes the State Department as 'the place to be right now'.

One of the perks was access to classified information: 'Yeah, working in IT for the State Department guarantees you'll have to have Top Secret clearance.' He also offers tips on career strategy. State was 'understaffed right now'. He goes on: 'Europe posts are competitive, but you can get in the door much easier if you express an interest in going to near-east hellholes. Once you're in, tough out the crappy tour and you should be able to pick from a list of preferred posts.' Later he remarks, 'Thank god for wars.'

Snowden's job-hopping worked for him personally. In 2007 the CIA sent him to Geneva in Switzerland on his

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first foreign tour. He was 24. His new job was to maintain security for the CIA's computer network and look after computer security for US diplomats based at the Geneva mission (the diplomats may have been high-powered but many had only a basic understanding of the internet). He was a telecommunications information systems officer. He also had to maintain the heating and air-conditioning.

Switzerland was an awakening and an adventure. It was the first time Snowden had lived abroad. Geneva was a hub for all sorts of spies – American, Russian and others. It hid commercial and diplomatic secrets. The city was home to a large community of bankers, as well as several UN secretariats and the HQs of multinational companies; about a third of its residents were foreigners. It was genteel, sedate and organised. Most of its residents were wealthy but a migrant underclass lived here too. (Snowden expressed amazement at how down-atheel Nigerians swiftly mastered Switzerland's numerous languages.)

The US mission where Snowden had diplomatic cover was in the centre of town – a 1970s glass and concrete block, accessed via a wrought-iron gate and protected by a hedge and wall. The Russian mission was close by. Snowden lived in a comfortable four-bedroom US government flat directly overlooking the River Rhône, at 16 Quai du Seujet, in the Saint-Jean Falaises part of town. In terms of lifestyle, the posting was hard to beat. A few blocks east was Lake Geneva, where the US ambassador had his residence. Not far away were the Alps and the challenges of climbing, skiing and hiking.

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The Ars Technica logs paint a portrait of a young man who, initially at least, still viewed the world through a provincial US prism. To begin with, Snowden had mixed feelings about the Swiss. In one chat he complains of high prices ('you guys wouldn't believe how expensive shit is here'), the lack of tap water in restaurants, and the exorbitant cost of hamburgers – \$15.

There were other moments of culture shock, over the metric system and Swiss affluence ('Jesus Christ are the Swiss rich. The fucking McDonald's workers make more money than I do,' he exclaims). But in general he warms to his new picturesque surroundings. In one exchange he writes:

- <TheTrueHOOHA> the roads are 35 inches wide
- <TheTrueHOOHA> with 9000 cars on them, two tram tracks, and a bus lane
- <TheTrueHOOHA> and a bike lane
- <TheTrueHOOHA> i imagine mirrors get clipped off all the time
- <TheTrueHOOHA> I'm afraid I'd bump into someone and have to pay for it.
- <User3> do they have a large immigrant population doing
 the lower-class work?

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<TheTrueHOOHA> Yeah. Lots of unidentifiable southeast asian people and eastern europeans who don't speak french or english

<TheTrueHOOHA> but don't get me wrong -- this place is amazing

<TheTrueHOOHA> it's like living in a postcard

<TheTrueHOOHA> it's just nightmarishly expensive and horrifically classist

<User4> TheTrueHOOHA: where are you? .ch?

<TheTrueHOOHA> Yeah. Geneva, Switzerland

User4> wicked!

<TheTrueHOOHA> Yeah... it's pretty cool so far

In Geneva Snowden was exposed to an eclectic range of influences. He took part in Chinese New Year celebrations with his martial arts club. According to *Der Spiegel* Snowden participated in similar celebrations in Washington. At his flat in Geneva he hung a bar from the roof and kept fit by doing pull-ups. 'He once gave me a one-on-one martial arts lesson, and I was surprised by his abilities – and very amused that he seemed unable to go very easy on a newbie,' Mavanee Anderson, a friend in Geneva, wrote in Tennessee's *Chattanooga Times Free Press*.

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Snowden worked in a protected part of the US mission. His real job was CIA field officer. For public purposes, however, he was an American diplomat; during his time in Geneva he used the cover-name Dave M Churchyard, personnel number 2339176. *Der Spiegel* reported that many of his colleagues were unaware of Snowden's job, including a group of marines who were stationed at the building to provide security. In July 2007, one Saturday evening, Snowden went out with around 15 embassy personnel for dinner in the old city. The American party included several soldiers with top secret clearance.

They were aware of Snowden's true role. 'I know what you do,' one of them told Snowden teasingly. 'I admire you.' Other colleagues took up the theme. Snowden suggested a change of venue, but the speculation spilled over into another bar. It was a tricky moment for Snowden, *Spiegel* reported, citing one person who was there. The incident demonstrated how perilous undercover work could be. Afterwards Snowden avoided large groups and ventured out with one friend at a time. On another occasion, the magazine said, he was invited to a birthday party. The host clicked a photo of her guests and posted it on Facebook; a horrified Snowden demanded it be removed. It was.

Snowden took spycraft seriously. And soon his superiors noticed his talents. According to Greenwald, in April 2008 Snowden was part of a team from the US Geneva mission that travelled to Romania. Its task was to prepare for a visit by President George W Bush to the NATO summit in Bucharest. The CIA appears to have

selected Snowden because of his impressive technical and cyber-security skills; the travelling White House delegation an obvious target for espionage.

During his Europe trip Bush expressed strong support for NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine. This infuriated Vladimir Putin. (For Putin, NATO's eastward expansion amounted to unacceptable encroachment in Russia's post-Soviet backyard. Putin would go on to invade both countries, in 2008 and 2014 respectively.) The secret service took care of Bush's personal security, while Snowden and other CIA officers did reconnaissance.

Snowden's had been a comparatively insular upbringing on the US east coast. But now he was living in the heart of Europe, thanks to the US government, and helping the White House with trusted assignments. His CIA job brought other privileges, too. When he got parking tickets he didn't pay them. He cited diplomatic immunity. He was also sent on assignment to other European CIA stations, where he installed computer software. According to Ars Technica, Snowden travelled to Sarajevo, where he listened to the Muslim call to prayer from his hotel room. He visited Bosnia and Spain – giving opinions on their food and women. He raced motorbikes in Italy.

Back at base Snowden sometimes wondered whether Switzerland was a 'bit racist'. At the same time he was impressed by Swiss attitudes towards individual liberty, and the fact that prostitution was legal. During this period he was also a fervent believer in capitalism and free markets.

His faith was practical as well as doctrinal. For much of his Swiss period he was playing the stock market,

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unapologetically shorting stocks and watching with a fascinated horror as the 2008 global crash unfolded, sucking the US and Europe into a vortex. Sometimes he made money; quite often he lost it.

He chats online about his exploits. He defends the gold standard. He is dismissive of high unemployment – seeing it, according to Ars, as 'necessary' and a 'correction to capitalism'. When one user asks how 'do you deal with 12 per cent unemployment?', Snowden hits back: 'Almost everyone was self-employed prior to 1900. Why is 12 per cent unemployment so terrifying?'

The figure who most closely embodied Snowden's maverick right-wing views was Ron Paul, the most famous exponent of American libertarianism, who enjoyed an enthusiastic grassroots following, especially among the young. Paul spent 30 years in Congress, on and off, defying both the Republican establishment and the political consensus. He was a bitter opponent of socialism, Keynesian economics and the Federal Reserve. He was against US intervention abroad. He loathed government surveillance.

Snowden supported Paul's 2008 bid for the US presidency. He was also impressed with the Republican candidate John McCain, describing him as an 'excellent leader' and 'a guy with real values'. He wasn't an Obama supporter as such. But he didn't object to him either. During the election, Snowden said he might back Obama if he could somehow team up with McCain – an unlikely prospect. TheTrueHOOHA posts on Ars: 'We need an idealist first and foremost. Hillary Clinton, I think, would be a pox on the country.'

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Once Obama won and became president, Snowden came to dislike him intensely. He criticised the White House's attempts to ban assault weapons. The lodestar in Snowden's thinking, at this time and later, was the US constitution; in this case the second amendment and the right to bear arms. Snowden was unimpressed by affirmative action. He was also against social security, believing that individuals shouldn't go running to the state for help, even in times of trouble.

A couple of users called him out on this, one posting: 'Yeah! Fuck old people!'

The True HOOA responded with fury. He wrote: 'You fucking retards ... my grandmother is eighty fucking three this year and, you know what, she still supports herself as a goddamned hairdresser ... maybe when you grow up and actually pay taxes, you'll understand.'

Another topic made him even angrier. The Snowden of 2009 inveighed against government officials who leaked classified information to newspapers – the worst crime conceivable, in Snowden's apoplectic view. In January of that year the *New York Times* published a report on a secret Israeli plan to attack Iran. It said that President Bush had 'deflected' a request from Israel for specialised bunker-busting bombs to carry out the risky mission. Instead Bush had told the Israelis he had authorised 'new covert action' to sabotage Iran's suspected nuclear-weapons programme.

The *Times* said its story was based on 15 months' worth of interviews with current and former US officials, European and Israeli officials, other experts and international nuclear inspectors.

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The True HOOHA's response, published by Ars Technica, is worth quoting in full:

<TheTrueHOOHA> HOLY SHIT

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/11/

washington/11iran.html?_r=1&hp

<TheTrueHOOHA> WTF NYTIMES

<TheTrueHOOHA> Are they TRYING to start a war?

Jesus christ

they're like wikileaks

<User19> they're just reporting, dude.

<TheTrueHOOHA> They're reporting classified shit

User19> Shrugs

<TheTrueHOOHA> about an unpopular country surrounded by

enemies already engaged in a war

and about our interactions with said country regarding planning sovereignty violations of

another country

you don't put that shit in the NEWSPAPER

<User19> Meh

sources telling them this?

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<TheTrueHOOHA> those people should be shot in the balls.

<TheTrueHOOHA> 'But the tense exchanges also prompted the White House to step up intelligence-sharing with Israel and brief Israeli officials on new American efforts to subtly sabotage Iran's nuclear infrastructure, a major covert program that Mr. Bush is about to hand off to President-elect Barack Obama.'

<TheTrueHOOHA> HELLO? HOW COVERT IS IT NOW? THANK
YOU

<us>User19>Meh

<TheTrueHOOHA> I wonder how many hundreds of millions of dollars they just completely blew.

<User19> You're over-reacting. It's fine.

<TheTrueHOOHA> It's not an overreaction. They have a HISTORY of this shit

<User19> with flowers and cake.

<TheTrueHOOHA> these are the same people who blew the whole 'we could listen to osama's cell phone' thing the same people who screwed us on wiretapping over and over and over again. Thank God they're going out of business.

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<User19> the NYT?

<TheTrueHOOHA> Hopefully they'll finally go bankrupt this year.

yeah.

A few minutes later the chat continues:

<User19>
It's nice they report on stuff.

<TheTrueHOOHA> I enjoy it when it's ethical reporting.

<TheTrueHOOHA> political corruption, sure

<TheTrueHOOHA> scandal, yes

<User19> is it unethical to report on the government's

intrigue?

<TheTrueHOOHA> VIOLATING NATIONAL SECURITY? no

<User19> meh.

<User19> national security.

<TheTrueHOOHA> Um, YEEEEEEEEEES.

<TheTrueHOOHA> that shit is classified for a reason

<TheTrueHOOHA> it's not because 'oh we hope our citizens don't

find out'

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<TheTrueHOOHA> it's because 'this shit won't work if iran knows what we're doing.'

User19> Shrugs

<TheTrueHOOHA> 'None would speak on the record because of the great secrecy surrounding the intelligence developed on Iran.'

<TheTrueHOOHA> direct. quote.

<TheTrueHOOHA> THEN WHY ARE YOU TALKING TO REPORTERS?!

<TheTrueHOOHA> 'Those covert operations, and the question of whether Israel will settle for something less than a conventional attack on Iran, pose immediate and wrenching decisions for Mr. Obama.'

<TheTrueHOOHA> THEY'RE NOT COVERT ANYMORE

<TheTrueHOOHA> Oh you've got to be fucking kidding me. Now the NYTimes is going to determine our foreign policy?

<TheTrueHOOHA> And Obama?

<TheTrueH00HA> Obama just appointed a fucking POLITICIAN to run the CIA!

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<User11> yes unlike every other director of CIA ever

User11> oh wait, no

<TheTrueHOOHA> I am so angry right now. This is completely unbelievable.

The 'fucking politician' was Leon Panetta, appointed by Obama in 2009 despite his evident lack of intelligence background. The appointment was supposed to draw a line under the intelligence scandals of the Bush years – the renditions, the secret CIA prisons and the illegal wiretapping.

Snowden evidently knew of WikiLeaks, a niche transparency website whose story would later intersect with his own. But he didn't like it. At this point, Snowden's antipathy towards the *New York Times* was based on his opinion that 'they are worse than Wikileaks'. Later, however, he would go on to accuse the paper of not publishing quickly enough and of sitting on unambiguous evidence of White House illegality. These are somewhat contradictory views.

Certainly Snowden's anti-leaking invective seems stunningly at odds with his own later behaviour. But there is a difference between what the *Times* arguably did – reveal details of sensitive covert operations – and what Snowden would do in 2013. Snowden nowadays explains: 'Most of the secrets the CIA has are about people, not machines and systems, so I didn't feel comfortable with disclosures that I thought could endanger anyone.'

In fact, Snowden would trace the beginning of his own disillusionment with government spying to this time in

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Switzerland, and to the near-three years he spent around CIA officers. His friend Mavanee Anderson, a legal intern working for the US mission to the UN in Geneva at that time, describes him as quiet, thoughtful, introspective, and someone who carefully weighed up the consequences of any action. By the end of his Geneva stint, she claims Snowden was experiencing a 'crisis of conscience'.

Snowden later spoke of a formative incident. He told Greenwald that CIA operatives tried to recruit a Swiss banker in order to get hold of secret financial information. Snowden said they pulled this off by getting the banker drunk and then encouraging him to drive home, which he foolishly did. The Swiss police arrested him. The undercover agent offered to help, and exploited the incident successfully to befriend and then recruit the banker.

'Much of what I saw in Geneva really disillusioned me about how my government functions and what its impact is in the world. I realised that I was part of something that was doing far more harm than good,' he said.

Any decision to spill US government secrets as a result was inchoate, an idea slowly forming in Snowden's head. Nor, it appears, had he yet seen the most contentious documents he was later to leak. Snowden says that he was ready to give President Obama the benefit of the doubt, and was waiting for him to reverse the most egregious civil liberties abuses of the Bush era. They included Guantanamo Bay, a US military dumping ground for fighters rounded up on the battlefield, some of whom had no connection with extremism or al-Qaida, and yet who languished for years without trial.

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Snowden wanted Obama to bring to account those from Team Bush who were responsible: 'Obama's campaign promises and election gave me faith that he would lead us toward fixing the problems he outlined in his quest for votes. Many Americans felt similarly. Unfortunately, shortly after assuming power, he closed the door on investigating systemic violations of law, deepened and expanded several abusive programmes, and refused to spend the political capital to end the kind of human rights violations we see in Guantanamo, where men still sit without charge.'

What did Snowden's bosses know of his unhappy state of mind? In 2009 Snowden fell out with one of his Geneva colleagues. He gave an account of the incident to the *New York Times*'s James Risen. According to Risen, Snowden was keen to get promoted but got embroiled in a 'petty email spat' with a superior, whose judgement he challenged. Months later, Snowden was filling in his annual CIA self-evaluation form. He detected flaws in the personnel web application and pointed those out to his boss. His boss told him to drop it but eventually agreed to allow Snowden to test the system's susceptibility to hacking.

Snowden added some code and text 'in a non-malicious manner', proving his point. His immediate boss signed off on it. But then the more senior manager with whom Snowden had clashed previously discovered what he had done and was furious. The manager entered a derogatory report – known as a 'derog' in spy parlance – into Snowden's file.

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This relatively trivial episode was important in one respect: it may have demonstrated to Snowden the futility of raising grievances via internal channels. Complaining upwards only led to punishment, he could have concluded. But for now there were new horizons to explore.

In February 2009 Snowden resigned from the CIA. His personnel file, whatever it contained, was never forwarded to his next employer – the NSA. Now Snowden was to work as a contractor at an NSA facility on a US military base, out in Japan.

The opportunities for contractors had boomed in the years since 9/11, as the burgeoning US security state outsourced intelligence tasks to private companies. Top officials such as the NSA's former director Michael Hayden moved effortlessly between government and corporations. This was a revolving door – a lucrative one. Snowden was now on the payroll of Dell, the computer firm. The early lacunae in his CV were by this stage pretty much irrelevant. He had top-secret clearance and outstanding computer skills. Whatever misgivings his former CIA colleagues may have had were lost in the system.

Snowden felt passionately about Japan from his early teens. He had spent a year and a half studying Japanese; he dropped 'Arigatou gozaimasu!' and other phrases into his first Ars chat. Snowden sometimes used the Japanese pronunciation of his name. He dubbed himself: 'E-do-waa-do' and wrote in 2001: 'I've always dreamed of being able to "make it" in Japan. I'd love a cushy .gov job over there.' He played Tekken obsessively; playing an everyman-warrior battling evil against the odds shaped

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his moral outlook, he later said. Between 2002 and 2004 he worked as the webmaster for Ryuhana Press, a Japanese anime website.

Snowden was keen to improve his language and technical skills. In 2009 he signed up for summer school at a Tokyo-based campus affiliated to the University of Maryland's University College.

During Japan, Snowden's online activity dries up, however. He pretty much stops posting on Ars Technica. Japan marks a turning point. It is the period when Snowden goes from disillusioned technician to proto-whistleblower. As Snowden had sight of more top-secret material, showing the scale of NSA data mining, his antipathy towards the Obama administration grew. 'I watched as Obama advanced the very policies that I thought would be reined in,' Snowden says, adding of his Japan period: 'I got hardened.'

Between 2009 and 2012 Snowden says he found out just how all-consuming the NSA's surveillance activities are: 'They are intent on making every conversation and every form of behaviour in the world known to them.' He also realised another uncomfortable truth: that the congressional oversight mechanisms built into the US system and designed to keep the NSA in check had failed. 'You can't wait around for someone else to act. I had been looking for leaders, but I realised that leadership is about being the first to act.'

By the time he left Japan in 2012, Snowden was a whistleblower-in-waiting.

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