
Snowden: Traitor or Hero?

Segment Length: 6:45 minutes

Lesson Description:

What makes a whistleblower a traitor? What makes a traitor a whistleblower? Edward Snowden revealed government secrets. What secrets? That the federal government spies on its own citizens through a mass surveillance program it denied existed, even to Congress. The U.S. government canceled Snowden's passport, considers him a traitor, and he now lives in exile.

Concepts & Key Terms:

Exile – the state of being barred from one's native country, typically for political or punitive reasons

Traitor – a person who betrays a friend, country, principle, etc.

NSA – National Security Agency, a national-level intelligence agency of the United States Department of Defense

Whistleblower - a person who informs on a person or organization engaged in an illegal, illicit, or unsafe activity, or a waste, fraud, or abuse of taxpayer funds

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Define the terms “traitor” and “whistleblower” and apply the terms to Edward Snowden.
- Discuss Edward Snowden's motives and actions regarding the release of government secrets.
- Argue their belief that Edward Snowden is either a traitor or whistleblower.
- Evaluate the actions of Edward Snowden and determine if he should be forced to remain in exile.

Preview Activity:

Use Think, Pair, Share to have students answer and discuss these three preview questions: What is a traitor? What is a whistleblower? Can a person be both? Explain.

Viewing Guide:

We recommend that teachers show the video twice: once to allow students to view it and focus on the issues presented, and once to allow them time to complete the viewing guide. After they complete the viewing guide, allow students a few minutes to work in pairs sharing and verifying answers.

Answers to Viewing Guide

1. secrets
2. realization
3. everything
4. journalists
5. Congress
6. exile
7. passport

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Viewing Guide

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____

Teacher _____

Directions: As you watch the video, fill in the blanks with the correct words.

1. Eight years ago [2013], Edward Snowden revealed government _____.
2. What changed me was a _____ that what our government actually does was very different than the public representation of it
3. We're capturing _____ that your family is doing online, that your friends are doing online.
4. Snowden took documents to _____ and the world learned the truth about the NSA's spying.
5. The president said _____ knew about the spying, but they didn't because NSA officials misled them.
6. But now that I've done the research, I conclude that you really got screwed. Yet you talk about this very dispassionately and thoughtfully. Aren't you pissed off? I mean, James Clapper lied to Congress and he wasn't fired and now he works for CNN. Keith Alexander now is on Amazon's board. They made out, you're in _____.
7. They canceled my _____, which meant I couldn't leave Russia.

Now, take a few moments to reflect on the video and answer the questions below:

What did Edward Snowden do? _____

Why did he do it? _____

If you were Edward Snowden, what would you have done? _____

Why? _____

Discussion and Analysis:

1. Does the government always do what's right? Should we always believe what the government tells us? Why might some of our government's activities differ from what we think?
2. What role does the media have in this? What role should the media have?
3. Why do some people refer to Edward Snowden as a whistleblower? Why do some people refer to him as a traitor?
4. "What changed me," Edward Snowden said, "was a realization that what our government actually does was very different than the public representation of it." What did he mean?
5. Edward Snowden said the government captures what we do online. How do you feel about this? Is that spying? What if they told you that this was done to protect us from terrorists?
6. Should the government be allowed to track our internet use? Why or why not?
7. Keith Alexander is a retired four-star Army general who served as director of the NSA. James Clapper is a retired Air Force lieutenant general who served as Director of National Intelligence. Both misled Congress in public hearings about the government's mass surveillance program. Why do you think they were not punished?
8. Edward Snowden broke his word. He signed legal documents in which he agreed not to disclose information that he ultimately disclosed. Can't the government keep secrets? Should the mass surveillance program be one of those secrets? Why/Why not?
9. Edward Snowden fled the United States to avoid being prosecuted and jailed for a long time. Our government canceled his passport and he is stuck—exiled—in Russia. Does he deserve that? Why/Why not?
10. Should Edward Snowden be allowed to return to the United States without going to jail? Why/Why not?
11. Edward Snowden said that governments used to be able to shut down conversations and silence people through distance—by exiling them. Why does he say, "Exile as a political weapon is beginning to fail?"
12. Edward Snowden said that he is at peace with the choices he made and the price he paid for his actions because it was the right thing to do. Was it? Explain.
13. What would you have done? What would you have risked?

Discuss These Lines from the Video

1. You went to work for the government, you signed agreements saying you wouldn't talk about what you did.
2. What changed me was a realization that what our government actually does was very different than the public representation of it.

3. We're capturing everything that your family is doing online, that your friends are doing online.
4. US officials also said Snowden could have revealed the government's lawbreaking legally.
5. The president said Congress knew about the spying. But they didn't because NSA officials misled them.
6. They constantly tell us, "this is for your safety." This is to investigate terrorists, right? Barack Obama's own investigations into this found that it didn't stop a single terrorist attack.
7. And every time one of these countries would appear to be leaning towards granting asylum, they would get a phone call from then-Secretary of State John Kerry, or then-Vice President Joe Biden. They canceled my passport, which meant I couldn't leave Russia.

Quotes for Discussion:

You could watch entire villages and see what everyone was doing. I watched NSA tracking people's internet activities as they typed. I became aware of just how invasive U.S. surveillance capabilities had become. I realized the true breadth of this system. And almost nobody knew it was happening.
– Edward Snowden

I call people who are covering up NSA crimes traitors.
– William Binney

If an NSA, FBI, CIA, DIA, etc. analyst has access to query raw SIGINT databases, they can enter and get results for anything they want. Phone number, email, user ID, cell phone handset ID (IMEI), and so on – it's all the same.
– Edward Snowden

The NSA is not listening to anyone's phone calls. They're not reading any American's e-mails. They're collecting simply the data that your phone company already has, and which you don't have a reasonable expectation of privacy, so they can search that data quickly in the event of a terrorist plot.
– Tom Cotton

At least 80% of fiber-optic cables globally go via the U.S. This is no accident and allows the U.S. to view all communication coming in. At least 80% of all audio calls, not just metadata, are recorded and stored in the U.S. The NSA lies about what it stores.
– William Binney

In 1979, the Supreme Court ruled 5-3 in *Smith v. Maryland* that a few days' worth of phone records for a single individual were not protected by the Fourth Amendment. The NSA today, though, collects hundreds of millions of phone records from hundreds of millions of Americans without an individualized warrant.
– Rand Paul

Snowden and NSA leaders should be brought together face-to-face for questioning in public by a congressional investigatory committee, with both parties allowed to make their points and to counter the assertions of the other. If Snowden is lying, it will come out. If the NSA is lying, it will come out.
– Robert Zubrin

There is no reliable way to calculate from the number of recorded compliance issues how many Americans have had their communications improperly collected, stored or distributed by the NSA.
– Barton Gellman

With the Patriot Bill in place, the NSA no longer needed to get a warrant from a judge to tap into anybody's electronic information. A Surveillance State that would have boggled the mind of Orwell was born. – Jay Parini

Edward Snowden may not be a Chinese mole, but he might as well be. He's just handed Beijing a major score, while the NSA struggles to pick up the pieces – and the rest of us pay the price in terms of future national security. – Arthur L. Herman

Personally, the NSA collecting data on me freaks me out. It totally freaks me out. And yet I'm from the generation that wants to put a GPS in their kids so I always know where they are. – Joss Whedon

Every country needs its whistleblowers. They are crucial to a healthy society. The employee who, in the public interest, has the independence of judgement and the personal courage to challenge malpractice or illegality is a kind of public hero. – Fuad Alakbarov

The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults. – Alexis de Tocqueville

What we revealed is that this spying system is devoted not to terrorists, but is directed to innocent people around the world. None of this has anything to do with terrorism. – Glenn Greenwald

We must remain mindful of the potential impact of over-correcting the authorizations of the intelligence community. – James Clapper

If National Security Agency (NSA) heads fundamentally lack an understanding of what constitutes constitutionally protected communications, or worse, chose to disregard those directives, then it's time for the appropriate heads of these agencies to resign. – Mark Meadows

Activities:

1. Have students complete the PMI chart after viewing the video.
2. Have students complete the political cartoon activity in class or for homework.
3. Conduct a classroom debate on whether Edward Snowden is a hero or a traitor. To get students to look at the proposal from a different perspective, consider having them argue from a position with which they disagree. Students should be given time to research their position prior to debating. (Another option is to conduct a class trial of Edward Snowden.)
4. Write a letter from Edward Snowden to a friend in the United States. Include in the letter how it feels to be exiled in Russia and starting a family, what he gained and lost by revealing NSA secrets, and what the future looks like for him and his family. (An alternative is to write a letter from Edward Snowden to the President of the United States, asking the president to pardon Snowden and explaining why Snowden believes he should be pardoned.
5. Research and prepare a slideshow that supports the premise that Edward Snowden is a hero or a traitor.

6. Have students research William Binney, Thomas Drake, Julian Assange, or Chelsea Manning, and have the students write an essay that explains how each was involved in the release of government secrets and how the government responded.
7. On September 2, 2020, a U.S. federal court ruled that the U.S. intelligence's mass surveillance program, exposed by Edward Snowden, was illegal, and possibly unconstitutional. Research that court case and in a slideshow or essay, present the arguments on both sides of the case and explain the basis for the judges' decision.
8. Distribute individual quotes from the Quotes for Discussion section to pairs of students. Have the students discuss the meaning of the quote, and write the meaning on the back of the quote. Collect the quotes and the students' explanations as an exit ticket.
9. Write a persuasive essay with supporting evidence that Edward Snowden is either a hero or a traitor. Have the students think about it as if they were in Snowden's situation. Be sure to address the opposing side of the argument, and other's (teachers, family, friends) views in your essay.
10. Use the internet to find and read updated news articles and quotes about Edward Snowden. Then, write a summary of it.
11. Watch the full-length Stossel interview of Edward Snowden write specific examples that further support their belief on Snowden. The Full Snowden Interview:

<https://youtu.be/ZSu4rCizyUM>
12. Watch and summarize the 2016 movie, *Snowden*. After your summary, discuss ways the movie met your expectations and ways it did not.
13. Research and write an essay or present a slideshow on the Espionage Act. When was it passed? How has it been used? What else should people know about this law?
14. Produce a "man-on-the-street" video in which you ask people if they have heard of Edward Snowden and if they think he is a hero or traitor. Then ask why.

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____ Per _____

Teacher _____

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PMI Chart

P = Plus: What are some positive effects of Edward Snowden's actions?

M = Minus: What are some negative effects of Edward Snowden's actions?

I = Interesting: What did you find interesting about Edward Snowden's actions?

+ Pluses +	- Minuses -	I

Is Edward Snowden a whistleblower, traitor, both, or neither? _____

Please explain your answer: _____

Should American citizens be concerned about what Edward Snowden did? _____ Why/Why not? _____

Should American citizens be concerned about the NSA? _____ Why/Why not? _____

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Political Cartoon Activity

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____

Teacher _____

Directions: Use the political cartoon to answer the questions below.



Briefly describe what is happening in the political cartoon: _____

What is Edward Snowden carrying? _____

Why? _____

What is ironic about what the characters representing Russia and China say? _____

What is the purpose or message the cartoonist is trying to convey? _____