

The Washington Post

MONDAY, JUNE 10, 2013

Man who leaked NSA secrets steps forward

A REPORTER'S ACCOUNT

To leaker, personal risks were clear

BY BARTON GELLMAN

He called me BRASSBANNER, a code name in the double-barreled style of the National Security Agency, where he worked in the signals intelligence directorate.

Verax was the name he chose for himself, “truth teller” in Latin. I asked him early on, without reply, whether he intended to hint at the alternative fates that lay before him.

Two British dissenters had used the pseudonym. Clement Walker, a 17th-century detractor of Parliament, died in the brutal confines of the Tower of London. Two centuries later, social critic Henry Dunckley adopted “Verax” as his byline over weekly columns in the Manchester Examiner. He was showered with testimonials and an honorary degree.

Edward Joseph Snowden, 29, knew full well the risks he had undertaken and the awesome powers that would soon be arrayed to hunt for him. Pseudonyms were the least of his precautions as we corresponded from afar. Snowden was spilling some of the most sensitive secrets of a surveillance apparatus he had grown to detest. By late last month, he believed he was already “on the X” — exposure imminent.

“I understand that I will be made to suffer for my actions, and that the return of this information to the public marks my end,” he wrote in early May,

before we had our first direct contact. He warned that even journalists who pursued his story were at risk until they published.

The U.S. intelligence community, he wrote, “will most certainly kill you if they think you are the single point of failure that could stop this disclosure and make them the sole owner of this information.”

I did not believe that literally, but I knew he had reason to fear.

A series of indirect contacts preceded our first direct exchange May 16. Snowden was not yet ready to tell me his name, but he said he was certain to be exposed — by his own hand or somebody else’s. Until then, he asked that I not quote him at length. He said semantic analysis, another of the NSA’s capabilities, would identify him by his patterns of language.

“You can’t protect the source,” he wrote, “but if you help me make the truth known, I will consider it a fair trade.” Later, he added, “There’s no saving me.”

I asked him, at the risk of estrangement, how he could justify exposing intel-



GUARDIAN VIA REUTERS

Before the world knew his name, tech specialist Edward Snowden, 29, now in Hong Kong, drafted a note of explanation. STORY, A4

ligence methods that might benefit U.S. adversaries.

“Perhaps I am naive,” he replied, “but I believe that at this point in history, the greatest danger to our freedom and way of life comes from the reasonable fear of omniscient State powers kept in check by nothing more than policy documents.” The steady expansion of surveillance powers, he wrote, is “such a direct threat to democratic governance that I have risked my life and family for it.”

In an e-mail on May 24, he dropped a bombshell. Whistleblowers before him, he said, had been destroyed by the experience. Snowden wanted “to embolden others to step forward,” he wrote, by showing that “they can win.” He therefore planned to apply for asylum in Iceland or some other country “with strong internet and press freedoms,” although “the strength of the reaction will determine how choosy I can be.”

He alluded to other options, aware that he had secrets of considerable financial value, but said, “I have no desire to provide raw source material to a foreign government.”

To effect his plan, Snowden asked for a guarantee that The Washington Post would publish — within 72 hours — the full text of a PowerPoint presentation describing PRISM, a top-secret surveillance program that gathered intelligence from Microsoft, Facebook, Google and other Silicon Valley giants. He also asked that The Post publish online a cryptographic key that he could use to prove to a foreign embassy that he was the document’s source.

I told him we would not make any guarantee about what we published or when. (The Post broke the story two weeks later, on Thursday. The Post sought the views of government officials about the potential harm to national security prior to publication and decided to reproduce only four of the 41 slides.)

Snowden replied succinctly, “I regret that we weren’t able to keep this project unilateral.” Shortly afterward he made contact with Glenn Greenwald of the British newspaper the Guardian.

We continued our correspondence. He was capable of melodrama but wrote with some eloquence about his beliefs.

“The internet is on principle a system that you reveal yourself to in order to fully enjoy, which differentiates it from, say, a music player,” he wrote. “It is a TV that watches you. The majority of people in developed countries spend at least some time interacting with the Internet, and Governments are abusing that necessity in secret to extend their powers beyond what is necessary and appropriate.”

What about legitimate threats to national security?

“We managed to survive greater threats in our history ... than a few disorganized terrorist groups and rogue states without resorting to these sorts of programs,” he wrote. “It is not that I do not value intelligence, but that I oppose ... omniscient, automatic, mass surveillance. ... That seems to me a greater threat to the institutions of free society than missed intelligence reports, and unworthy of the costs.”

Did he impute evil motives to his former colleagues, or the White House?

“Analysts (and government in general) aren’t bad guys, and they don’t want to think of themselves as such,” he replied. But he said they labored under a false premise that “if a surveillance program produces information of value, it legitimizes it. ... In one step, we’ve managed to justify the operation of the Panopticon” — an 18th-century design by British philosopher Jeremy Bentham for comprehensive surveillance of a prison population.

On Thursday, before The Post published its first story, I made contact on a new channel. He was not expecting me there and responded in alarm.

“Do I know you?” he wrote.

I sent him a note on another channel to verify my digital “fingerprint,” a precaution we had been using for some time. Tired, I sent the wrong one. “That is not at all the right fingerprint,” he wrote, preparing to sign off. “You’re getting MITM’d.” He was talking about a “man in the middle” attack, a standard NSA technique to bypass

encryption. I hastily corrected my error.

“The police already visited my house [in Hawaii] this morning” with questions on his whereabouts, he wrote, explaining his jitters. “It obviously has a profound and intimidating impact on my family.”

Despite our previous dispute about publishing the PRISM document in full, Snowden said he did not intend to release a pile of unedited documents upon the world. “I don’t desire to enable the Bradley Manning argument that these were released recklessly and unreviewed,” he said.

On Sunday afternoon, as his name was released to the world, Snowden chatted with me live from a Hong Kong hotel

room, not far from a CIA base in the U.S. Consulate.

“There’s no precedent in my life for this kind of thing,” he wrote. “I’ve been a spy for almost all of my adult life — I don’t like being in the spotlight.”

I asked him once more which of the two Veraxes he expected to become: the happy ending or life behind bars?

“That’s up to the global public,” he typed back. “If asylum is offered, we’ll have the first example. If not, we’ll have the second. I am prepared for both.”

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