

Forum discusses impacts of Snowden's actions



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Is Edward Snowden, the former National Security Administration (NSA) contractor who stole approximately 1.7 million top-secret files and turned them over to the media, a traitor or a hero?

Short answer: It's complicated.

Snowden's acts and their potential repercussions, positive and negative, were the topic of discussion at an International Forum held Monday afternoon in Farber Hall on the USD campus.

"I think that the question some of you should be thinking about is whether Mr. Snowden has done us a service in revealing information that wouldn't normally come into the public domain, and if the nature of this service mitigates his unlawful conduct?" said Gregory Huckabee, associate professor with the Beacom School of Business.

In the past, cases such as Watergate and the Pentagon Papers brought about positive change via the cooperation of whistleblowers and the national media, he said.

However, Huckabee added that all of these cases need to be taken on an individual basis, and that it is too soon to know in the Snowden case.

A big part of the issue revolves around the sheer number of files Snowden took, said Tom Martin, former head of the USD ROTC program.

There's so much information, it can't be sorted, he said.

"Just think of the volume of information that we're talking on just the wiretaps," Martin said. "Put yourself on the 50-yard line at the DakotaDome, and the DakotaDome is filled to maximum capacity with spectators. You have all these people in the crowd, and you're supposed to find one person who's holding up a pen from the

Beacom School of Business. Do you think you're going to find that one person? They're a literal needle in a haystack."

There is a responsibility on the side of the journalists, as well, said Tom Sorensen, associate dean of the USD School of Law, and a former journalist himself.

"There is a real balancing act here," Sorensen said. "What are the consequences of what you do? Who decides?"

Sorensen said most journalists would tell you that they have made no decision, they're just reporting the facts – even if that isn't quite the case.

"Too often, the media are in the parade instead of covering the parade," he said. "There are responsibilities on both sides, but the law says this person is charged and deserves a proper hearing in the court of law."

Martin said the entire case is a matter of "the birds coming home to roost."

Before he came to USD in 2009, Martin was assigned to major military operations that sometimes required intelligence, after 9-11 in particular.

With the increased need for intelligence, more independent contractors were used, such as Booz Allen Hamilton, Snowden's former employer.

Because so many intelligence workers are needed, background checks are not often as thorough as they should be, Martin said.

"These people doing the background checks are under pressure," he said. "They need to meet quotas, they need to keep producing. Do a few people slip through the cracks? Sure. I don't think Mr. Snowden was one who slipped through the cracks."

"But, just to make you feel really safe, just think of how easy it is for someone to lie about things and get into a position where they have access to this type of information if the really wanted to do some damage, or wanted to sell secrets?" he said.

Martin did add that – to his knowledge – Snowden has not sold any of the files he stole.

The panelists said the Snowden case also raises concerns about the role of the NSA in national defense – specifically whether the office is overstepping its bounds.

"I think the Patriot Act got a foot in the door that I wasn't comfortable with, even though I value my safety and my security. I also value my privacy," Sorensen said.

"I don't really feel any safer knowing that the NSA is doing this, because a lot of times people forget there's an enemy out there," Martin said. "Our enemy happens to be al-Qaida right now. The enemy is not stupid. The enemy gets bugged. If you think that al-Qaida operatives that are currently in the United States don't think that their telephone conversations might be monitored, I've



Tom Martin, former head of the USD ROTC program, Tom Sorensen, associate dean of the USD School of Law, and Gregory Huckabee, associate professor with the Beacom School of Business participate in Monday's International Forum on the USD campus.

(Photo by David Lias)

got a couple bridges in different locations that I can sell you. These people are not stupid."

While the overall damage done by Snowden is "miniscule," Martin said, he has broken the law.

"If you steal from a thief, are you still a thief?" he asked.

Huckabee compared Snowden's actions to those of I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, the George W. Bush White House official who "outed" then-CIA operative Valerie Plame.

Because of Libby's actions, other CIA operatives were subsequently killed after their cover was blown, Huckabee said.

"Just as that leader did not care about those CIA

operatives' lives, Snowden does not care about the lives of national security personnel, military and civilian, he has placed in harm's way," Huckabee said. "When you balance the freedom to know with the freedom to live, I know which one I favor more. We have laws for just this purpose."

"I hope Edward

Snowden enjoys his new life in Russia. He sold his own country for his self-appointed purposes, and lives have been jeopardized. He does not care about that, but we do."

The International Forum was moderated by Benno Wymar and sponsored by the Beacom School of Business.

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