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Nov 04, 2016 by [Daryl Copeland](#)

The Snowden Affair: 2013 as a “Napster Year” for Government Secrecy and World Order ^[1]

When historians look back at the first few decades of the 21st century, 2013 will almost certainly be seen as a game-changing year.

That judgement can in the main be attributed to a series of disclosures made by American fugitive Ed Snowden, formerly a low level CIA employee and National Security Agency sub-contractor whose flight and subsequent revelations have given rise to sensational reverberations across the globe.

According to Snowden’s principal journalistic collaborators, Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras, the material released so far is barely the tip of the iceberg relative to what is yet to come.

As we await the jarring geopolitical screech that will undoubtedly attend the next set whistles to be blown, it is perhaps worth reflecting on some of the larger, longer-term implications.

When the story broke last June, the coverage was focussed on Snowden the man, his quest for a safe haven, and the scope of corporate and international complicity. More recent pre-occupations have included consideration of the trade-offs between national security and

individual privacy, detailed investigations into the nature and extent of state-sponsored cyber-spying and collusion, and the expression of concern over the digital vacuuming of metadata.

To be sure, these are portentous issues. None of them, however, nor even the content of Snowden's "alternative" Christmas message or the growing number of tributes and awards, capture the full import of the episode.

Just as the emergence of the peer-to-peer music file sharing web site Napster changed the music industry forever, Snowden's command performance may mark the beginning of the end of an era of unprecedented government surveillance and secrecy. There is no question that it has also illuminated fundamental shifts in the distribution of national power and the exercise of global influence.

World order - increasingly more heteropolitan than multi-polar - is beginning to look very different.

Score one for a free press, civil society and the public interest...

Snowden has made strategic and highly effective use of the mainstream media to promote and publicize items drawn from his vast corpus of documents.

Unlike WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, Snowden's extensive relations with the press - including The Guardian (Britain), The Washington Post and The New York Times (US), Der Spiegel (Germany), Le Monde (France), O Globo (Brazil) and similar facilities in Australia, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Spain and Canada - have been both cooperative and highly selective. Armed with the information published, some NGOs, especially in the USA, have harnessed popular antipathy and challenged intrusive practices in the courts. Others have used the law in hopes of paring back the unchecked growth, especially post 9/11, of the surveillance state. Panels have been struck and senior officials, including the President, seem prepared to reign-in the staggering array of intelligence agencies and place them under heightened oversight and more rigorous accountability.

...but forget about Manifest Destiny.

Last September, it was revealed that the US had been spying on Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, some of her key aides, and Petrobras, the giant national oil company. In response, Rousseff abruptly cancelled her state visit to Washington. Coming from the head of Latin America's largest, most important, and most assiduously courted country, this represented an unprecedented, and hitherto unthinkable snub. Worse yet, it came at a time when Uncle Sam's position in the region - which was set back further when similar allegations surfaced regarding Mexico - had reached new lows. Chinese eyes are undoubtedly smiling as traditional Gringo hegemony is battered by these, and other very public hits,

The deputy sheriff is asleep...

Australia, America's longstanding political proxy and closest military ally in SE Asia, recently experienced a rude awakening in the face of a rapidly rising Indonesia. When it was disclosed in November that as part of a regional, U.S.-led effort Australia had tapped the phones of President Yudhoyono, his wife and several other key players, the Indonesian President asked for an apology. Australian PM Abbott, in a breathtaking blunder in crisis communications,

refused, and instead displayed an attitude reminiscent of an Australian leader plucked from the middle years of the previous century. In response, Indonesia recalled its ambassador, cut off military and intelligence cooperation, and threatened to suspend food imports and all bilateral activity in the areas of immigration, people smuggling, resource management, and maritime security. In Jakarta at the time, I was repeatedly asked, "Why can't the Australians understand that we are now more important to them than they are to us?" As power shifts inexorably from the North Atlantic to the Asia Pacific, this question could scarcely seem more apt.

...but the bear is wide awake.

2013 was by most measures a banner year for Russia, not least for the propaganda coup of landing Snowden with an offer of temporary asylum. In recognition of his resurgent power, President Putin received pack-leading kudos. His long-serving and formidable Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, danced diplomatic circles around the competition and engineered significant international gains for Russia in Syria, Iran, and the Ukraine. It took a couple of decades to regain direction and momentum following the collapse of the USSR, but Russia is back in the game and garnering newfound respect - if not necessarily admiration - as a force to be reckoned with.

And Canada?

Canadian pundits have placed little emphasis on these points. Cast for the most part in a supporting role, Canada has been a bit player in the Snowden affair, a role which ironically mirrors the more broadly-based erosion of this country's global image, stature, and reputation. The world's once familiar peace-keeper, humanitarian internationalist and font of progressive foreign policy thinking and action has morphed into something almost unrecognizable. From boy scout to fossil of the year, today's Canada has become the self-appointed tough guy on the block. The transformation from earnest advocate of peace and development to macho militarist, hard-line ideologue and unapologetic huckster has been dizzying.

Predictions for 2014? Governments will find it ever harder to keep secrets, and the accelerated evolution of world order will produce more surprises, many of them nasty.

The ride is likely to be bumpy.

But at least it won't be dull.

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