

# 'Snowden': A bloated (yet effective) take on the controversial whistle blower

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There's a scene in director Oliver Stone's "Snowden" where a doctor tells our titular hero (or anti-hero, depending on how you look at it) that he's no longer physically able to serve in the U.S. Army Reserve. Ed is obviously distraught; his military career is in shambles. The doctor tells him not to worry. "There's plenty of other ways to serve your country," he says. The music swells. Snowden looks thoughtful. Cue a career transition, and the rest is history.

These words – "there are plenty of other ways to serve your country" – serve as the plot and infrastructure's pulse. Of course, Snowden figures out just what those "other ways" look like, and the movie dutifully covers his rise in the CIA as its newest whiz-kid, his romantically spurred political softening, and his transition to the National Security Agency as a contractor, until his ever-growing disillusionment leads him to leak U.S. government mass surveillance tactics to the global media in 2013.

The movie itself seems like Stone's very own way to serve his country, less a film-film and more a soppy, dutiful lecture, and this inflated sense of self-importance weighs "Snowden" down. THIS MATTERS, the movie seems to scream.

To its credit, it does manage to cram lots of elements into one film. The ghosts of 9/11 and even past world wars loom large. Unfortunately, however, what's compelling about Snowden's actual story itself is, well, the story, and while the man who blew the whistle is certainly interesting, screenwriters Kieran Fitzgerald and Stone here get lost in so obviously hitting all the right emotional beats, establishing motives, and unnecessarily heightening drama that it downgrades more-fascinating-than-fiction material into what feels like a slick and prettily-produced after-school special.

Its strongest moments are when it sheds pretense and lets the facts speak for themselves. In the rare scenes when Snowden isn't SNOWDEN, the Chosen One, but merely Ed, our tortured in-man, the film breathes. Take the audience's introductions to both surveillance database XKeyscore and drone strikes in real time. In those two different moments, where the tech that controls and ends peoples lives is treated as casually as a video game, "Snowden" is suddenly scary and unreal because it's real. It's during those scenes, not the ones highlighting the collapse of Ed's romantic relationship or his hacker-buddy hijinks, that the movie is genuinely effortlessly watchable.

that you can just feel the reverberations of Fitzgerald and Stone's congratulatory high-five across time and space. Cheesy expositional dialogue gives birth to more cheesy expositional dialogue like some-tortured Mobius strip. Its naked posturing unintentionally distracts from the story's poignancy.

Most frustrating of all is that Ed is portrayed unflinchingly as a hero, at one point quite literally walking off into the sunset. It doesn't feel as though through Stone's lens we are allowed to consider Ed as anything beyond a friendly, geeky patriot. While I'm inclined to agree with Stone's take on our main character, addressing the ambiguity with which citizens view his choices, or the juxtaposition of watching the life of a man so against watching, could have added a level of dynamism that the film lacked. Or, at the very least, made Ed more consistently approachable.

The movie wasn't a complete disaster, though. It takes great pains to make the multi-faceted tale easily digestible, and the film's stars – Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who sounds eerily like Ed, Shailene Woodley, Zachary Quinto, Melissa Leo, Tom Wilkinson, Rhys Ifans, and, yes, even Nicholas Cage – perform admirably in their respective roles. Stone does an excellent job visualizing surveillance, cutting between wide shots and those that look like they were gleaned from a hidden camera with enough frequency that at some points it feels like you're watching a surveillance feed. In one of the film's most powerful scenes, Ed is reprimanded by a colleague over Skype on a huge monitor, a chilling invocation of "Big Brother" imagery.

Flaws aside, "Snowden" is ultimately effective. While problematically ham-fisted at times, it sheds light on uncomfortable truths about the U.S. government in an engaging way. In my theater, one audience member cursed aloud when Ed discussed the scope of the government's surveillance practices. I was tempted to join her. Then, when the movie leaves Ed in Russia, it hands the baton off to the viewer. Now that you know, what are you going to do about it?

At the end of my screening, I was faced with an opportunity to consider just that. The American Civil Liberties Union announced [its petition \(https://action.aclu.org/secure/grant\\_snowden\\_immunity\)](https://action.aclu.org/secure/grant_snowden_immunity) for the official presidential pardon of Ed, a move that coincides with the film's wide release September 16. While those connected to the real-life events work to combat what they view [as misinformation about the situation and the man \(https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/exclusive/first-cipher-brief-snowdens-boss-shares-lessons-learned-1095?utm\\_content=buffer10b04&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_campaign=buffer\)](https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/exclusive/first-cipher-brief-snowdens-boss-shares-lessons-learned-1095?utm_content=buffer10b04&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer), a high-profile film like "Snowden" will only generate more interest in the subject matter from viewers who potentially view the movie as straight gospel, embellishment aside.

Privacy pros, what are you going to do about it?

*Top image courtesy of Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OVHjPCOb3c>)*

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