

Third Place Winner
Division I– 7-9th Grades
The War of Information
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Winston could hear the rumble of shells detonating in the distance. He was not worried; in Oceania, where he lived, the sound was akin to road noise and just as common. He was more concerned someone would see him taking a different route home from work. It was an irregularity that could make him “disappear”. His legs trembled as he hurried down the road (Orwell). This is a scene from *1984*, a book depicting a dystopian future in which the government can see-and thereby control-everything that its citizens do, use, and see. On October 26, 2001, Congress enacted a law that would allow them to do exactly that. The “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA-PATRIOT) Act” gave law enforcement the authority to “intercept wire, oral, and electronic communications” between U.S. residents (United States Congress). This also meant that “third party holders of your financial, library, travel, video rental, phone, medical, church, synagogue, or mosque records” could be searched without a person’s knowledge or permission (Jochum). Citizens’ private information that used to be protected by law was readily accessible to the government. Many of the documents revealing the extent of these surveillance programs were classified. In 2013, however, a CIA contractor named Edward Snowden created an uproar when he pulled off one of the largest leaks in U.S. history and released thousands of these classified documents to the public. Edward Snowden showed moral courage by risking his citizenship to impact public opinion and sway my own.

Moral courage is upholding one’s beliefs in the face of immorality, despite the consequences. On May 20, 2013, 29-year-old Edward Snowden stepped off his plane and took a deep breath. He had arrived in Hong Kong. No one, not even his partner, Lindsay Mills, knew why he was there, or, in fact, that he was there at all. He was preparing to execute a leak that would make explosive revelations about the actions of one of the most powerful governments in the world. Snowden knew about the invasive, unethical programs used by the National Security Agency (NSA) and the enormous power given to the government under the Patriot Act, and although it would mean potentially losing his partner, his freedom, and his citizenship, his morals compelled him to share his knowledge. A few days after his arrival in Hong Kong, Snowden disclosed thousands of top-secret documents revealing the extent of NSA surveillance programs to The Guardian, which published the information. He then claimed full responsibility for the disclosures, which is unprecedented in the history of US leaks. When the United States government sought his extradition from Hong Kong, he took asylum in Russia and has not yet been able to return to America. Edward Snowden forfeited the life he knew to improve the lives of citizens like me (Elliot).

Edward Snowden impacted the country and how its citizens’ view privacy and security. The cultural ripples his actions caused have been dubbed by popular media as “The Snowden Effect”. He created national conversations about whether it is worth sacrificing personal privacy in the name of security. His document disclosure led to a comprehensive reconsideration of the Patriot Act, and ultimately to the creation of the “Uniting and Strengthening America by Fulfilling Rights and Ensuring Effective Discipline over Monitoring (USA-FREEDOM) Act” in 2015 (Forsyth). This act revises the privacy breaching provisions of the Patriot Act and protects Americans’ right to confidentiality. Before the USA FREEDOM Act was signed into law, the NSA was able to collect bulk data from millions of people’s phone calls and

other communications. Under the new program, the NSA will only be able to access specific records from telecommunication service providers. Snowden also created shifts in the technology sector. His disclosures opened the door for technology giants like Apple to put the protection of users' information ahead of the government's desire to have it. This is especially important in the digital age, as all our most coveted information is on our phones (Forsyth).

Edward Snowden is seen by some as a traitor and by many as a hero. To me, though, he will always be both. Snowden is a traitor to those who thought that he, like many others, would keep their secrets, but he is a hero to all those who now benefit from his actions. Through Snowden's story, I saw the massive power information can give to those who wield it. Governments can use it to control and incite fear in their citizens, but individuals can use it to spark widespread change, as Snowden did. His refusal to hide from his actions showed me that I should not let intimidation by powers greater than me deter me from taking action and doing what is right. Snowden used information to create a positive change in the category of personal privacy and security. Since researching his story, I am determined to do the same in an area I am passionate about: immigration. In recent times, I have seen how vicious stereotypes about immigrants, some coming from our own government, can lead to hatred or even violence against them. Inspired by Snowden's courage in standing up for what is right, I have decided to join a nonprofit dedicated to protecting immigrants through educating the public.

Edward Snowden exemplified moral courage by risking his citizenship to inform public opinion and impact my own. He risked losing his partner, his citizenship, and his freedom to inform Americans of the controlling actions of their government. His disclosure of secret documents led to the creation of the USA FREEDOM Act, which made America a freer place for citizens like me. His story has shown me the power of information to inspire change. His courage in the face of powers greater than him demonstrated to me that I should not let fear keep me from doing what is right. In Oceania, Winston lives in constant fear; because of Snowden, I live free.

Works Cited

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