

Whistleblower: snitch or hero?

Informants often discredited on personal grounds

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As the world wrestles with the hero-or-traitor conundrum posed by ex-CIA technician Edward Snowden and his bombshell revelations about U.S. government surveillance of citizens' email and phone traffic, longtime promoters of the whistle-blowing movement — a now-global phenomenon launched by American political activist Ralph Nader in 1971 — are defending the informant ethic as a noble instinct and a crucial check on corruption, corporate malfeasance, excessive secrecy and other abuses of power in modern democracies.

But where some see personal courage and a sterling sense of civic duty on display in the secrecy breach at the U.S. National Security Agency, critics of whistleblowers such as Snowden, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and Bradley Manning, the U.S. soldier now on trial for his massive leak of classified American diplomatic dispatches, instead see a betrayal of trust, reckless glory-seeking and even the aiding of terrorists and other "enemies of the state."

In the four decades since they emerged as a significant force in North American political culture, whistleblowers have been at the heart of a complex and ever-evolving love-hate relationship with governments, corporations, media organizations and the public. While often hailed as crusaders for truth and accountability, some would-be whistleblowers have also been dismissed as conspiratorial cranks, company turncoats or unpatriotic "snitches." The portrayal of Snowden as a failed man with an eccentric, "pole-dancing" girlfriend conforms to a common pattern of critics attempting to discredit whistleblowers on personal grounds, said David Hutton, executive director of Ottawa-based whistleblower advocacy group FAIR — Federal Accountability Initiative for Reform.

"There is a myth out there of the 'ugly whistleblower' — the irresponsible, self-interested, unreliable, disgruntled employee with bad motives," Hutton told Postmedia News. "Part of the reason that myth persists, and leaves people with a doubt in their mind, is because every time there's a high-profile situation, you get almost the exact same character attacks on the person."

But years of research, he said, indicates that whistleblowers are "much

more likely to be high performers, people who are respected by their colleagues. Only a tiny, tiny minority ever go to the media, even when everything else has failed ... They mostly use all the channels available to them in the belief or the hope that the organization will recognize the problem and fix it."

Conscious of the ambivalent attitudes surrounding those who raise red flags about alleged corporate or government wrongdoing, it was Nader — the U.S. consumer advocate gained fame in the 1960s by exposing a series of safety scandals in the North American auto industry — who sought to rebrand whistle-blowing as unambiguously virtuous, an indispensable service to society provided by conscience-driven individuals choosing to confront the excesses and abuses of state or corporate power. In Canada, notable whistleblowers have included former Public Works employee Allan Cutler, whose disclosures about misspent federal funds in Quebec following the 1995 sovereignty referendum triggered the Sponsorship Scandal, sealing the collapse of the Liberals and the rise of the Conservatives in the 2006 general election.

Joanna Gualtieri, one of Canada's best-known whistleblowers and now a leading North American advocate of protecting those who spill government secrets to safeguard the public interest, said Snowden's harshest critics are following a "very typical" pattern of "smearing the whistleblower" in a way that "deflects entirely from the real issue" of over-the-top state snooping into Americans' private lives.

"If somebody has some information that is critical to your rights and freedoms, do you want to be bogged down in a debate about whether the whistleblower had too many drinks, or whether he slept with one too many girls in his life?" Gualtieri told Postmedia News. "Do you want the information that is critical to your well-being, or engage in a salacious smear campaign against the whistleblower? The ultimate issue is the integrity of the information that he discloses. In the surveillance state, which is what this is all about, the new enemy is the whistleblower."

Gualtieri, a lawyer and former public servant at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, waged a career-destroying, health-shattering, 18-year battle to expose abusive spending practices at Canadian embassies abroad — abuses that were later confirmed by formal audits. A workplace harassment suit that she launched in connection with her whistle-blowing efforts was finally settled in 2010.