H-Diplo Response to Article Review 987

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Author's response to Anders Stephanson's review of Kaeten Mistry. "A Transnational Protest against the National Security State: Whistle-blowing, Philip Agee, and Networks of Dissent." *The Journal of American History* (September 2019): 362-389. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jaz345

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National Security and Inside/Outside

In characteristic fashion, Anders Stephanson provides as much food for thought in his review, as does the object of his inquiry.[1] Probing the creases of national security whistleblowing as a concept, he raises questions about dissent-as-reform and organisational inside versus public outside into sharper focus. Identifying the inherent expansiveness and "invasive phenomenon" of U.S. national security, Stephanson somewhat underestimates the extent to which it diminishes the public sphere and restricts the possibility of democratic dialogue.

This note is not a typical riposte as much as an attempt to open out the discussion. Using whistleblowing as a lens, the crux of the matter is to consider the overdetermining role of national security. For the latter creates distinct spaces that prohibit the flow of information, while also limiting the possibilities of inquiry. Readers of this forum can no doubt recount numerous tales about the frustrations of accessing sources and idiosyncrasies of state secrecy (problems which are growing more acute with lagging declassification rates and increasing amounts of information being held behind high classification walls.) The 'public sphere' is, after all, everything beyond the national security state.

An insider with access to privileged information who discloses outside that organisation will not sit easily within any collective. The act of whistleblowing is by nature a solitary one. Stephanson questions whether someone like Philip Agee can be a national security whistle-blower. Agee, who was perennially on the margins both inside and outside 'the Company,' is hard to place, even amid an unprecedented wave of whistleblowing during the 1970s. His dissent was beyond classic liberalism and Ralph Nader's vision of civic responsibility and reform. Ethical, normative positions are possible in the corporate and non-security state arenas but not the world of national security. Stephanson's attempt to tie whistleblowing to political theory is thereby problematic since the politics are messy and ambiguous. The radicalism of Agee's guerrilla exposure has no place in any liberal standard. A case could be made for an Ernest Fitzgerald (detailing military procurement cost overruns), but not a Herbert Yardley (revealing code), Otis Otepka (red-baiting), Daniel Ellsberg (Vietnam), Chelsea Manning (disclosing cables), Edward Snowden (surveillance), or Reality Winner (election interference). One could hazard a guess at the underlying politics and philosophy, but it would be no more than that, while any connection to the act of whistleblowing is hazy at best. In other words, there can be no archetypal national security whistle-blower. Thus, the ties that bind; indiscriminate state retaliation.[2]

[1] H-Diplo Article Review 987, https://hdiplo.org/to/AR987.

[2] Hannah Gurman and Kaeten Mistry, "The Paradox of National Security Whistleblowing: Location and Framing a History of the Phenomenon," and Mistry, "The Rise and Fall of Anti-Imperial Whistleblowing in the Long 1970s," in Mistry and Gurman (eds.),

Which brings us to inside/outside. Here the determining framework of national security is most apparent. It is not so much that civic space is condensed as impossible to distinguish. While an Ellsberg or Snowden may foster debate in the public sphere, the U.S. state refuses to acknowledge them as legitimate voices. Since they are deemed instances of 'unauthorized disclosures,' any dialogue is rendered void. Neither the individual nor act of public exposure is recognised.

The delineation is rooted in competing notions of how to define national security whistleblowing. The state-sanctioned view is of the whistle-blower as an organisational defender, where measured, responsible disclosures to improve policies and systems within specific confines are tolerated. Provided the disclosure is kept in-house, a modicum of protection is offered (notably, this is *not* rooted in statute). The other view is of the whistle-blower as a public defender who reveals information publicly, often via the press, that poses deeper questions about structures and principles. This is widely understood in the public and cultural spheres, as demonstrated by the iconic cases, but is unrecognised by the state. (The notion of 'public interest' is of course inherently subjective and historically contested but should not detract from the unequivocal difference between whistle-blowing *within* and *outside* an organization.)

The gap between the two visions makes democratic dialogue unfeasible. There can never be consensus on an Ellsberg, Agee, Manning, Snowden, or Winner as a national security whistle-blower. Put another way, the idea of a public sphere is irrelevant, even by Stephanson's domestic casting of inside/outside, for one cannot reveal to the domestic (U.S.) inside without also telling the global outside. There is only the sanctity of the national security state or the hostile outside. From the early twentieth century to the present, there has never been a public arena, as far as the U.S. government is concerned, where national security whistleblowing is legitimate. Thus, while Agee is doubly abhorrent for addressing the Global South, he occupies a similar space to an Ellsberg speaking to a primarily domestic U.S. audience. Both have gone rogue; information now being on the outside.

How national security came to occupy such an oversized, determining role remains curiously under-examined. The term is deceptively familiar yet fluid as to what falls under its rubric. Even the most systematic effort at defining national security as a category of historical analysis left Melvyn Leffler acknowledging the definition to be "vague" and "its ambiguity was a strength."[3] Recently there has been increased scholarly attention to conceptual roots and foundational ideas.[4] Yet, aside from the post-World War II origin story, there is comparatively little on the subsequent evolution of the modern national security state.[5] The sheer size of the present-day behemoth may increase the odds of public disclosures (whether via whistle-blowing, leaks, press scoops), but the danger has exponentially grown for anyone taking information from the inside to the

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Whistleblowing Nation: The History of National Security Disclosures and the Cult of State Secrecy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 12-15, 18-21, 31, 130-43.

[3] Melvyn P. Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism: U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security, 1920–2015* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 317. Leffler's essay on "National Security" originally appeared in the 1991 edition of *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, was updated for the 3rd edition (2016) and reprinted in *Safeguarding*.

[4] For instance see Andrew Preston, "Monsters Everywhere: A Genealogy of National Security," *Diplomatic History* 38:3 (June 2014): 477–500; Dexter Fergie, "Geopolitics Turned Inwards: The Princeton Military Studies Group and the National Security Imagination," *Diplomatic History* 43:4 (September 2019): 644–670; Kate Epstein, "The Other Visible Hand: National Security and Intellectual Property in the United States before World War I," *Entreprises et Histoire* 85:4 (December 2016): 40–53.

[5] Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945–1954* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); Douglas T. Stuart, *Creating the National Security State: A History of the Law That Transformed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

outside. Moreover, and regardless of one's view on those traversing the secrecy Rubicon, it is hardly a sustainable means for accountability or systematically examining national security.

Returning briefly to Agee, his actions, however defined, highlight one strand of the wider history of national security disclosures. His life was remarkable as lived experience as well as bringing to light the pervasiveness of state secrecy. Since the 1970s, national security culture has entrenched in the face of opposition, while public interest in individuals that draw back the veil of secrecy has simultaneously heightened. Few mid-ranking U.S. national security officials captivated the attention of a cast of characters including Stewart Copeland's father, William Rehnquist, Bob Marley (via Marlon James), Ronald Reagan, Simone de Beauvoir, Christopher Hitchens, Barbara Bush, Costa-Gavras, and Mike Pompeo.

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