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Ray McGovern Interview Transcription:

Zain Raza:

Ray McGovern is a retired CIA officer, turned political activist. McGovern was a CIA analyst from 1963 to 1990 and in the 1980s chaired National Intelligence Estimates and prepared the presidents daily briefing. Mr. Ray McGovern, thank you for joining us.

Ray McGovern:

You're most welcome.

Zain Raza:

In 2006, you returned your Intelligence Commendation Medal. Could you describe your experience and why you made this decision?

Ray McGovern:

Yes. It was a time when the director of the CIA was openly pleading for an exception of legislation being drafted by Senator John McCain, prohibiting US government officials from torturing people. And, you know, I was not naïve. I knew about some experience on the operational part of the CIA with Latin American services and so forth having to do with torture. But this was the first time that the CIA was openly advocating for permission to be able to torture. And that seemed to me so abhorrent that I wanted to disassociate myself from the CIA for the first time since 1963, because I didn't want to be associated in any way, however remotely, with an agency engaged in torture.

Zain Raza:

Even president Obama criticized these harsh interrogation techniques in his first presidential campaign. Could you talk about what the European role was in this torture campaign, and if Obama actually went upon this promise and brought about some change, like holding public officials accountable.

Ray McGovern:

Well, the role of our "allies", in my view, is a scandal. 53 other countries cooperated in the kidnapping, "extraordinary rendition", of suspected terrorists to black sites where they were administered enhanced interrogation techniques, which by the way is a direct, literal translation of "verschärfte Vernehmung" right out of the Gestapo manual. I have the manual, and the sad thing is that many of the techniques are exactly the same ones with a few enhancements by the US since World War II. So the role of our European allies and others has just really disappointed me greatly.

Now why president Obama does not hold, or decided not to hold the torturers accountable is another very sad story. And, without talking around it, I will simply say that he is afraid of

them. Now I would have never thought that I would hear myself saying that the president of the United States is afraid of the CIA. But he is. He's afraid of the NSA as well. How else to explain that the National Intelligence director, who lied under oath to his senate overseers on the 12th of March 2013, is still the director of National Intelligence?

How else to explain that the head of CIA, John Brennan, who deliberately hacked the computers of the senate's intelligence community, that's supposed to be overseeing him, he's still in office? You know, it's hard to say this, but I suspect that Obama is afraid either of blackmail potential or even worse. And he has referred to the killing of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in this main saying, "don't you remember what happened to Dr. King?"

Zain Raza:

Let's get to Edward Snowden's story. You met him in Russia, that's right?

Ray McGovern:

That's right.

Zain Raza:

Casting aside all that he's done – we'll get to that in a bit –, could you talk about his personality that we don't hear much about? What is he like?

Ray McGovern:

He's a very low-key person. Except when there are electric moments. And I saw an electric moment as soon as I walked into the little hall where he was. I walked in first, and he knew we were coming of course. This was October 9, 2013. And I said, "Hello Ed", and he said, "Hello Ray." And then he saw behind me Tom Drake. That was the electric moment. When I saw him look at Tom Drake, I knew what he was thinking: this is the man who went through four years of torture, really, harassment by the department of justice, so that I, Ed Snowden, could learn how to achieve my mission and have some prospect of still being safe, okay?

And I saw Tom Drake look at him, and I've verified this with Tom: I said, "Tom, were you thinking this?" And Tom said, "Yes, I was thinking wow! Four years of that kind of indignity, of that kind of oppression, and I never thought anything good could come of it, but now...this was good. This was good."

And it was Tom who gave him the Sam Adams Award. It was just incredibly poignant, because this little coterie of whistleblowers that I had the privilege to be with – I was thinking of my Irish grandmother who would always say, "Show me your company and I'll tell you who you are." Well, I was looking up and said, "Grandma, how about these guys? How about these guys?" And I was sure she was saying, "All right, Raymond, all right."

Zain Raza:

I want to go through the critique points that Edward Snowden faces one by one. And as I go over each one of them, I'd like to ask for your response to each point. So the first point: He jeopardized the national security of the United States and her allies, which includes Germany.

Ray McGovern:

He did nothing of the kind. There is no jeopardy here. It's just like the accusations leveled at Bradley, now Chelsea Manning. All gloom and doom, and when the defense secretary was asked to testify to that, he said, these warnings, these dangers were, quote, "significantly overwrought."

Zain Raza:

He broke the law and could have used channels within the NSA to inform his supervisors.

Ray McGovern:

He tried to use channels within the NSA, and there was nobody who even remotely listened to him. The whistleblower protection for people like Edward Snowden is zero. And the president of the United States knows that and yet he hides that fact.

Zain Raza:

He's a Russian or Chinese spy.

Ray McGovern:

(laughs) That is ludicrous. That is what people used to use during the McCarthy years. I thought we had grown up from that.

Zain Raza:

To the last point. That the NSA has the right to accumulate data because if we haven't committed any wrongdoings there's nothing to hide.

Ray McGovern:

Well, I would answer with the words of the Stasi alumnus Wolfgang Schmidt, who was asked that question: "What about these Americans who say, I have nothing to hide?" And he said, and I quote: "This is very naïve. This is the reason that the government collects the information in the first place to use against you. The only way to prevent that is to prevent the information from being collected in the first place." End quote.

And that's it. They're going to use it. Why else would they collect it? And even if they don't use it, if you have a suspicion that they have the book on you, on your most secret activities, how is that going to work on your freedom of thought and freedom of expression?

Zain Raza:

Here in Germany, when we think about the CIA, we think about torture and extraordinary rendition. NSA, we think of the global surveillance system. FBI, we think of people breaking into our homes. Have you, as intelligence services, stepped out of bounds? And what role, if any at all, do you see them playing in this globalized society?

Ray McGovern:

Well, you know, I think the question really is, whether our political leaders have stepped out of bounds. Because all this has been approved by our political leaders, Cheney and Bush in the first instance, and now, sadly, Barack Obama in the second instance. Our bill of rights has been shredded. The fourth amendment specifically prohibits the kind of activities the NSA is involved in domestically. The fifth amendment prohibits any president or anyone else from killing anyone without due process. Now, how do you explain Obama's claim, that he can kill American citizens without due process? Well, he has his attorney general get up and say, "Well, it doesn't say in the constitution judicial process. It just says due process." Now that's a lawyerly diversion from the truth. Everyone knows that due process means judicial process, and when John Brennan brings him a list of people to be killed this particular week, that's not due process. That's certainly not judicial process. So there's the fifth amendment. Not even George Bush claimed the right to kill American citizens without due process.

Zain Raza:

There's a large chunk of people in the United States as well as Germany, according to polls,

that sort of agree with this NSA program. And we can see this fact, for example, by a development that our chancellor was being spied upon through her cell phone, as well as recently double agents were caught working inside the states. We know for sure, if Iran or Russia committed the same act, there would have been international crisis and possible sanctions and threat of war. What would you say to those German people that continue to remain passive despite this massive surveillance system from the NSA? What consequences could they face if we were not to stop this?

Ray McGovern:

I would say that not many German people are still alive, who experienced what happened during the third reich. We don't have to go to the Stasi, we can go to the Gestapo, and see what happens, when your human rights, your ability to a freedom of expression and a freedom of thought is infringed upon. This is terribly, terribly dangerous territory. And the passiveness, you know, the apathy, well, that's not responsible citizenship. When I'm asked, why am I an activist, I say, well that's the rent that I pay for living on this planet, okay?

We all have a responsibility, and as Rabbi Heschel, one of my prophets, has put it: "Those who condone, or are silent, in the face of injustice, are more guilty than the perpetrators." And so, to the degree we pretend to be a democracy, we have a corresponding duty to be activist enough to prevent our human rights from being infringed upon. Next year we will be celebrating the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta. Wow. Now, will we have a funeral? Will we have a code of inquest? Will we say, "Wasn't that nice when those gutsy nobles forced their rights out of King John?" Or will we say, "You know, that should obtain today too, and it's necessary to be an activist to make sure that that happens."

Zain Raza:

You talk about activists. What do you say to those people that have the drive to change something, but don't know where to start. What would you advise them?

Ray McGovern:

My advice to them is to form a small group. Five or six people, of people who think the way you do, and are willing to meet regularly, every week, and you will be surprised at what imaginative, gutsy thought and action comes out of that synergy. Takes a while, but there's something that every little group like that can do. Now the big danger is to avoid doing anything, unless you have a surety, unless you have an assurance that you'll be successful. It's not about being successful. It's about being faithful. The good is worth doing, because it's good. And who knows what the results will be? You know, we may just be planting seeds for future generations, but that's okay. We can't be deterred from doing things, because we might be laughed at, because somebody might say, "What did you think you'd accomplish by turning your back on the secretary of state," or something like that.

You do what you know is good, because it's good, and then you have a certain peace of mind, saying, you've been an activist in a constructive way.

Zain Raza:

Mr. Ray McGovern, retired CIA officer, turned political activist, thank you for joining us today.

Ray McGovern:

You're most welcome.

NOTE: This transcript may not be 100% accurate.