Glenn Greenwald: Snowden, Assange and the Price of Truth

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Aaron Mate (AM): Our final Excellence in Journalism award goes to Glenn Greenwald. Now, Glenn is so influential and impactful that it feels redundant to read his blur, but I'll do it. In 2013, Glenn led the Guardian's reporting on the National Security Agency documents disclosed by Edward Snowden. That work exposed a global system of mass surveillance, earned the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service, and transformed the worldwide debate over privacy, state power, and the treatment of whistleblowers. Glenn is a journalist, a former constitutional lawyer, author and co-founder of The Intercept. Through his show System Update, Glenn continues to report fearlessly on surveillance, censorship, war, and the treatment of dissidents and whistleblowers around the world. For his extraordinary commitment to independent public interest journalism, Integrity Media is proud to present the

Now, before we hear from Glenn, he will also be speaking about our Courage in Journalism Award which honours whistleblowers everywhere. So before we hear Glenn's remarks, please turn your attention to the screen.

Video

Glenn Greenwald (GG): Good evening everybody. Thank you so much for being here. I'm not actually a person that loves so much to come to events, but when I was asked to come here, it was such an easy decision, even though I had to travel quite a long way to get here. And as soon as I got here, I mentioned this earlier, today at the panel, the first person I saw was Gabriel Shipton, who is Julian Assange's brother. And then hours later, Julian, after three years, comes back on social media and says, I'm back, and kind of points to a mural. I became even more convinced of how easy of a decision it was to be here and you know there's a lot of these kind of events you come to and you sort of see people that you kind of like and you get to talk to and then you see people you don't really like that much you either have to talk or avoid and you can't wait for the evening to be over and honestly there's no event that I have ever felt more at home at or more inspired by than this one.

It is actually amazing to be in a room full of people everywhere you look who I have had so much respect and admiration for, have been so inspired by for so long. It's like a gathering of all the people who I've spent the last 20 years really respecting and admiring. And when I was asked to give a speech, not even accepting a word on behalf of myself, but actually accepting the award that was given by Integrity Media to the world's whistleblowers, it is really one of the highest honours of my life. And I wanna just talk a little bit about why I say this, why this event, the people gathered here, and especially the people on whose behalf I'm accepting this award, which are whistleblower's, for me, are so inspirational. And I was thinking about this a little before I had the opportunity for the first time to meet in person John Kiriakou, who I was on this panel with. And I kind of have this almost like obsession and trying to understand what it is that drives people to embrace the characteristic that I have come to find to be the most noble and the most admirable, which is the deliberate decision to give up easy paths or career rewarding paths or lucrative paths in pursuit of some cause to which people are devoted, a noble cause. And it's particularly inspiring to me, and particularly generating respect when people not only choose the more difficult path, but do so even knowing that they're risking that which is most valuable to every human being, which is our liberty.

And to me that's what whistleblowers embody, but also so many of the people in this room, the ethos that is represented by all of you is illustrated by as well. I mean, just look at my fellow reward recipients, Max Blumenthal, whose father was an extremely well-connected Democratic party operative. He had that path laid out to him. I think it's fair to say that Max chose not to pursue that path of being a Democratic party operative and instead chose a much more difficult one to the point where his journalism is now provoking the criminal investigation and other forms of persecution by the US government. We have Brianna, who graduates Harvard Law School, has the whole world at her feet, gets a very plum job as the press secretary for a major presidential campaign, something that makes careers, very lucrative careers in Washington and the media, and as she talked about, she chose not to do the minimal necessary to pursue that career, which is endorse the Democratic Party and Joe Biden instead refuses to do so, loses her place in this political class of Washington and then gets fired from her media job because she refuses to stop following her conscience and condemn Israel. And we have Jamie who's doing this remarkable work with police brutality in the neighbourhoods that are the most marginalised where there's very little money and very little mainstream prestige and yet somebody does that work solely because their conscience leads them to do it .and so I think everybody in this room whose work I know is most represented by that trait. I can't even mention all the people because I would go on for an hour, which I might anyway even though I'm trying to confine myself to ten minutes.

But I do want to talk about just one person in particular who has been a very long time political and intellectual hero of mine who I think exemplifies this trait as well as anybody and that's Professor John Mearsheimer. When I started writing about politics, it was late 2005, and although we all should recognise how much progress we've made in the ability to speak openly about the evils of the Israeli government and the evills of its influence in our country and the relationship that the United States has in being complicit in funding and

arming it, and we do have a lot more space than ever before, back in 2007 there was almost no space, in fact, talking about those things guaranteed your expulsion from mainstream institutions. Doors were shut. Careers were jeopardised because of it. And John Mearsheimer, who has a very prestigious position in the world as the scholar of international relations at the University of Chicago, with his partner Stephen Walt at Harvard, writes an article on one of the most rigidly enforced taboos in our country, which is the influence of the Israel lobby. And it's so taboo that despite their positions as leading scholars at our leading institutions, they can't even get it published in the United States. They have to go to London in order to get it published and then they write a book on it and it was one of the very first times where I understood the dangers and risk of speaking out on Israel because the campaign that was launched against them, this disgusting, grotesque, multi-pronged, intense attempt to destroy their reputations and careers, branding them anti-Semites, and they just continued to persist in their scholarly demonstration of their argument was something that I found so impressive because these are people who don't have to do that, who don't have to endure that kind of character assassination, and yet, again, chose to do it because their conscience compelled them to do it. And not only did I remember it, but I kept it in the front of my brain and I decided that is something that wants to guide me as well, and it's a lot easier said than done.

So this room is full of people whose work and whose life is defined by this attribute. And I've gotten a lot of credit for doing things of that kind, including this award. But I do want to say that my work and the work of a lot of the journalists in this room and a lot to the activists in this room would be completely impossible, in fact, nonexistent, without the whistleblowers on whose behalf I'm accepting this award. And I do think it's important to recognise that while we all take risks in different ways and make sacrifices in different way, whistleblowers really are in a different universe when it comes to that. Because these are people who, unlike journalists, you know, when I'm taking a risk, when I know that there's something I'm doing that can result in threats of prosecution, or as the work I did in Brazil, actual indictment of prosecution, I know that I have a lot of protections as a journalist, my platform gives me protections, that whistleblowers just don't have, not legally, not culturally, or in any other way. And these are people who decide that the information they've acquired about government illegality or abuse of power or deceit is so necessary for the public to have that they're not only willing to risk their own personal interests to do so, but they're willing to risk going to prison, and not just going to prison for a few months, but prison for years or even decades.

And even though I've worked with whistleblowers for so long now, people who have done that, I still find it unfathomable the level of courage and cause and conviction that that requires in order for somebody not only to contemplate doing that, but then to actually do it. And I'm so thrilled that there are whistleblowers who have done exactly that, whose work and character I've admired for so long, who are present with us tonight, including Ray McGovern and Coleen Rowely and Thomas Drake and John Kiriakou. And then there are people who are not here who have been crucial in creating the modern day understanding of whistleblowing and have pioneered what it means to take those risks, people like Daniel Ellsberg and William Binney and Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden and Julian Assange

and so many other people whose names appeared on that list. And I think it's so important to take a minute to think about the magnitude of what those people by definition have done. And as I said, the attribute that I respect more than any other is the willingness to sacrifice for a noble cause, sacrifice your own personal interest, your career, your financial interests, and I think everybody in this room in one way or the other has done that. And yet whistleblowing, as I've said, is a different level of bravery, it's a different of nobility, it's a different level of courage, because these are people who not only risk going to jail, but in many cases have gone to prison.

And I just want to give you this final insight, because in accepting the award on behalf of whistleblowers, I took very seriously the responsibility to try and capture the essence of why they are so deserving of so much adulation. And I talked a little bit about this earlier today, so for those of you who heard it, I'm gonna give some more colour and more depth to it, and for those who didn't, you'll hear it for the first time, but when I went to Hong Kong with Laura Poitras in 2013 to meet Edward Snowden, we had no idea who Edward Snowdon was. We didn't know his name. We didn't know his position in the government. We definitely didn't know his age. And all we knew is that he had access to extremely sensitive documents about what the NSA was doing that the public had the right to know because before we got on that plane we insisted that he provide us that and he did so. And so I in my mind – I'd been talking to him for a few months before I went to Hong Kong – always imagined this like old craggity guy, because I said to him over and over you know if you do this, it's almost certain you're gonna end up in prison, and not for some light felony, but for some of the most punishable felonies that exist in the US code. And right away, not only did he know that, but he had already learned about it, cited chapter and verse of the Espionage Act and everything else, and so I just imagined that in order for someone to get to the point where they say, yes, I know I'm likely to spend the rest of my life in prison for what I'm about to do, I just felt like it's probably easier for someone do that at the end of their life rather than at the beginning. Because it's one thing to be 70 and say, I'm willing to go to prison, but it's another thing to be in your 20s, which is what he was when he did what he did, and know that you're about to spend the rest of your life in prison.

And so when I got to Hong Kong and saw that it wasn't some guy near his retirement, which I also assumed because I assumed he was senior in government given the access that he had, but he was 29, he looked like some 22-year-old kid who worked at the mall. At first, we were very disoriented, because it was the opposite of what we expected. I actually was thinking, oh wow, have we been scammed despite our efforts to do this? Or is this like the assistant or the gay lover of the source who like came down to get us? I was just, every possibility imaginable. And then when we got to the room and I realised, no, this is the actual source and he is this young, I had to understand, in part because we wanted to make sure that we were dealing with somebody authentic, but also just for my own personal satisfaction, I needed to understand why somebody in their 20s, not somebody whose life was a big mess and was acting out of resentment, but somebody whose life was, by all metrics, incredibly successful and prosperous. He was making a lot of money working for Booz Allen. He had developed skills that, despite not having gone to college, guaranteed a very lucrative, professionally

successful future. He had his girlfriend who he was, his high school sweetheart, and they had been engaged and we're talking about getting married and he gave up all of that to spend the rest of his life in prison and I needed to understand why.

And I spent hours, the first four or five hours with him not talking about the documents but talking about why are you willing to do this. And I said earlier he's not a guy who spent years in therapy and doesn't spend a lot of time thinking about himself or trying to analyse his motives and so it was a lot of work to open that up and hear things other than cliches that didn't satisfy me at all. And finally, we got to that point where he was able to, probably for the first time, understand why he was doing what he was doing. And what he said to me was, and this is when I was convinced, without any doubt, that he was authentic, and not just authentic, but incredibly admirable. He basically said, I discovered something that shocked me. Judge Napolitano talked before about how the CIA, the National Security State, had a great taboo against directing its powers against the American people domestically. And yet, so many whistleblowers post 9/11, including Thomas Drake and William Binney and Snowden, were most shocked to learn that that is exactly what the National Security State was doing, was directing its power inward at the American People. And he said once he learned that, and further learned that what he had considered the most important innovation for liberation and emancipation, which was the internet, was being so severely compromised in secret to instead be degraded into the greatest weapon of surveillance and control and coercion, he said he could not live with himself if he knew that having the opportunity, one of the very few people who did to inform the public, he instead, out of fear or a lack of courage or selfishness, decided that he wasn't willing to endure the cost of doing so. And he told me that he can go to prison for 40 years, he knows he's going to suffer and be deprived and have a life that is very dark, but he told me and I believe it to this day that there was nothing they could do to him worse than having to live the rest of his life knowing that he didn't make the right choice.

And I think that is really what defines whistleblowers more than anything. So, my career would not have been possible without whistleblowers. Almost everything I've done of note has been because of them, because of that bravery and courage. I think it's true for a lot of people in this room, including people who have gotten awards tonight. And so, it would have been easy to come up here and accept the award on my own behalf, it was a lot harder, but also so much more gratifying to be able to do so on behalf of the world's whistleblower who deserve a thousand awards and a thousand evenings like this, because they're not only brave and courageous, but they're central to our ability to confront powerful institutions that are doing things they ought not to be doing, because without whistleblowers, they would succeed in doing them in the dark. And it's only thanks to them that we even are aware of the things that we have to confront and defeat. So I'm so grateful to accept an award on all of your behalf whistleblows around the world and in this room. And I am very appreciative as well to Len, to Integrity Media for my own award as well. Thank you so much.

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