

WORLD

Snowden Says He Took No Secret Files to Russia

By **JAMES RISEN** OCT. 17, 2013

WASHINGTON — Edward J. Snowden, the former National Security Agency contractor, said in an extensive interview this month that he did not take any secret N.S.A. documents with him to Russia when he fled there in June, assuring that Russian intelligence officials could not get access to them.

Mr. Snowden said he gave all of the classified documents he had obtained to journalists he met in Hong Kong, before flying to Moscow, and did not keep any copies for himself. He did not take the files to Russia “because it wouldn’t serve the public interest,” he said.

“What would be the unique value of personally carrying another copy of the materials onward?” he added.

He also asserted that he was able to protect the documents from China’s spies because he was familiar with that nation’s intelligence abilities, saying that as an N.S.A. contractor he had targeted Chinese operations and had taught a course on Chinese cybercounterintelligence.

“There’s a zero percent chance the Russians or Chinese have received any documents,” he said.

American intelligence officials have expressed grave concern that the files

might have fallen into the hands of foreign intelligence services, but Mr. Snowden said he believed that the N.S.A. knew he had not cooperated with the Russians or the Chinese. He said he was publicly revealing that he no longer had any agency documents to explain why he was confident that Russia had not gained access to them. He had been reluctant to disclose that information previously, he said, for fear of exposing the journalists to greater scrutiny.

In a wide-ranging interview over several days in the last week, Mr. Snowden offered detailed responses to accusations that have been leveled against him by American officials and other critics, provided new insights into why he became disillusioned with the N.S.A. and decided to disclose the documents, and talked about the international debate over surveillance that resulted from the revelations. The interview took place through encrypted online communications.

Mr. Snowden, 30, has been praised by privacy advocates and assailed by government officials as a traitor who has caused irreparable harm, and he is facing charges under the Espionage Act for leaking the N.S.A. documents to the news media. In the interview, he said he believed he was a whistle-blower who was acting in the nation's best interests by revealing information about the N.S.A.'s surveillance dragnet and huge collections of communications data, including that of Americans.

He argued that he had helped American national security by prompting a badly needed public debate about the scope of the intelligence effort. "The secret continuance of these programs represents a far greater danger than their disclosure," he said. He added that he had been more concerned that Americans had not been told about the N.S.A.'s reach than he was about any specific surveillance operation.

"So long as there's broad support amongst a people, it can be argued there's a level of legitimacy even to the most invasive and morally wrong program, as it was an informed and willing decision," he said. "However,

programs that are implemented in secret, out of public oversight, lack that legitimacy, and that's a problem. It also represents a dangerous normalization of 'governing in the dark,' where decisions with enormous public impact occur without any public input."

Mr. Snowden said he had never considered defecting while in Hong Kong, nor in Russia, where he has been permitted to stay for one year. He said he felt confident that he had kept the documents secure from Chinese spies, and that the N.S.A. knew he had done so. His last target while working as an agency contractor was China, he said, adding that he had had "access to every target, every active operation" mounted by the N.S.A. against the Chinese. "Full lists of them," he said.

"If that was compromised," he went on, "N.S.A. would have set the table on fire from slamming it so many times in denouncing the damage it had caused. Yet N.S.A. has not offered a single example of damage from the leaks. They haven't said boo about it except 'we think,' 'maybe,' 'have to assume' from anonymous and former officials. Not 'China is going dark.' Not 'the Chinese military has shut us out.' "

An N.S.A. spokeswoman did not respond Thursday to a request for comment on Mr. Snowden's assertions.

Mr. Snowden said his decision to leak N.S.A. documents developed gradually, dating back at least to his time working as a technician in the Geneva station of the C.I.A. His experiences there, Mr. Snowden said, fed his doubts about the intelligence community, while also convincing him that working through the chain of command would only lead to retribution.

He disputed an account in *The New York Times* last week reporting that a derogatory comment placed in his personnel evaluation while he was in Geneva was a result of suspicions that he was trying to break in to classified files to which he was not authorized to have access. (The C.I.A. later took issue with the description of why he had been reprimanded.) Mr. Snowden said the

comment was placed in his file by a senior manager seeking to punish him for trying to warn the C.I.A. about a computer vulnerability.

Mr. Snowden said that in 2008 and 2009, he was working in Geneva as a telecommunications information systems officer, handling everything from information technology and computer networks to maintenance of the heating and air-conditioning systems. He began pushing for a promotion, but got into what he termed a “petty e-mail spat” in which he questioned a senior manager’s judgment.

Several months later, Mr. Snowden said, he was writing his annual self-evaluation when he discovered flaws in the software of the C.I.A.’s personnel Web applications that would make them vulnerable to hacking. He warned his supervisor, he said, but his boss advised him to drop the matter and not rock the boat. After a technical team also brushed him off, he said, his boss finally agreed to allow him to test the system to prove that it was flawed.

He did so by adding some code and text “in a nonmalicious manner” to his evaluation document that showed that the vulnerability existed, he said. His immediate supervisor signed off on it and sent it through the system, but a more senior manager — the man Mr. Snowden had challenged earlier — was furious and filed a critical comment in Mr. Snowden’s personnel file, he said.

He said he had considered filing a complaint with the C.I.A.’s inspector general about what he considered to be a reprisal, adding that he could not recall whether he had done so or a supervisor had talked him out of it. A C.I.A. spokesman declined to comment on Mr. Snowden’s account of the episode or whether he had filed a complaint.

But the incident, Mr. Snowden said, convinced him that trying to work through the system would only lead to punishment. He said he knew of others who suffered reprisals for what they had exposed, including Thomas A. Drake, who was prosecuted for disclosing N.S.A. contracting abuses to The Baltimore Sun. (He met with Mr. Snowden in Moscow last week to present an award to

him for his actions.) And he knew other N.S.A. employees who had gotten into trouble for embarrassing a senior official in an e-mail chain that included a line, referring to the Chinese Army, that said, “Is this the P.L.A. or the N.S.A.?”

Mr. Snowden added that inside the spy agency “there’s a lot of dissent — palpable with some, even.” But he said that people were kept in line through “fear and a false image of patriotism,” which he described as “obedience to authority.”

He said he believed that if he tried to question the N.S.A.’s surveillance operations as an insider, his efforts “would have been buried forever,” and he would “have been discredited and ruined.” He said that “the system does not work,” adding that “you have to report wrongdoing to those most responsible for it.”

Mr. Snowden said he finally decided to act when he discovered a copy of a classified 2009 inspector general’s report on the N.S.A.’s warrantless wiretapping program during the Bush administration. He said he found the document through a “dirty word search,” which he described as an effort by a systems administrator to check a computer system for things that should not be there in order to delete them and sanitize the system.

“It was too highly classified to be where it was,” he said of the report. He opened the document to make certain that it did not belong there, and after he saw what it revealed, “curiosity prevailed,” he said.

After reading about the program, which skirted the existing surveillance laws, he concluded that it had been illegal, he said. “If the highest officials in government can break the law without fearing punishment or even any repercussions at all,” he said, “secret powers become tremendously dangerous.”

He would not say exactly when he read the report, or discuss the timing of his subsequent actions to collect N.S.A. documents in order to leak them. But

he said that reading the report helped crystallize his decision. “You can’t read something like that and not realize what it means for all of these systems we have,” he said.

Mr. Snowden said that the impact of his decision to disclose information about the N.S.A. had been bigger than he had anticipated. He added that he did not control what the journalists who had the documents wrote about. He said that he handed over the documents to them because he wanted his own bias “divorced from the decision-making of publication,” and that “technical solutions were in place to ensure the work of the journalists couldn’t be interfered with.”

Mr. Snowden declined to provide details about his living conditions in Moscow, except to say that he was not under Russian government control and was free to move around.

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