

Citizen Four (2014)

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 54 min.

Our Content ratings (0-10): Violence 0; Language 5; Sex/Nudity 0.

Our star rating (0-5): 4.5

Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!

Isaiah 5:20

For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

John 3:20

It is no secret that governments, whether in this country they be Republican or Democratic, love secrecy. Even those who some of us think of as “The Good Guys,” who criticize those in power as not being transparent, fall prey to this addiction for keeping as much as possible under wraps when they are elected to office—which in a nutshell is the message of this documentary by Laura Poitras. And so I would say, whatever you presently think of the film’s subject Edward Snowden—traitor or hero—do see this film and judge for yourself. It is an amazing film in that it is a part of the history it records—imagine if a film crew had been able to follow and interview “Deep Throat” during reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein’s investigation of the Watergate break-in! The hour-long central portion of this film is just such an interview, taking place over several days in a Hong Kong hotel in June of 2013—and the story is breaking around the world as Snowden is speaking, by the end of the period a crowd of reporters having gathered at the hotel.

At the beginning of the film Poitras reads us some emails from a "Citizenfour," the then unknown Snowden, asking for a meeting. He says that he did not choose her, but that she in a sense chose him because of her previous documentaries that had been so critical of the US war in Iraq and dealings at Guantanamo. She had been put on a secret government watch list so that during the 40 or so times she had traveled in and out of the US she had been harassed by security agents—so much so that she had moved to Berlin so as to be able to travel more freely.

She and journalist Glenn Greenwald spend eight days interviewing Snowden, and later are joined by *The Guardian's* intelligence correspondent Ewen MacAskill. Snowden comes across as a calm, intelligent person who has thought carefully about each step he has taken, He sees his mission as that of a whistle blower concerned that the NSA is prying too deeply into people's private lives—and not only of Americans, but of foreign leaders as well, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel. He says that he has decided to come out in the open because he will be found out anyway, and he wants the story not to be about himself, but that of the gross overstepping of the NSA. In a world where governments possessing vast banks of computers can learn much about persons without ever actually reading the content of their files and email, he hope that his example will lead others possessing knowledge of abuses of power will also be willing to stick their necks out and reveal what they know. Also he has left it up to the journalists concerning what NSA files to reveal to the public because he believes they are more capable than he of judging the suitability of doing this.

In contrast to Snowden's forthrightness we see Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and Director of the National Security Agency (NSA) Keith Alexander boldly lying to Congress at a hearing about their program of gathering intelligence from the Internet and telephone systems. We also

hear from William Binney, who worked as a government intelligence analyst, but then became so upset with government's abuses of power after 9/11 that he turned whistleblower. He was harassed by the FBI who invaded his home with drawn guns to seize his records, such instances as this showing the falseness of claims made by President Obama and NSA officials that Snowden should have gone through "proper channels" to protest the abuses. Lawyers who meet to help Snowden point out that had Snowden given in and allowed himself to be arrested, he would have been charged under espionage laws passed during the WW 1 era, the rules of which would have stacked the deck against him.

Near the end we see, almost as if we were NSA agents, long shots of Snowden and his lover through the windows of their Moscow apartment. After a long separation they are now able to be together again. The last sequence seems to be a calling for a sequel: Greenwald travels to Moscow to reveal to the surprised whistle blower that what he had hoped is coming about. While talking in general terms the journalist writes notes on pieces of paper for Snowden to read, then crumples and tears the sheets up. Snowden is very pleased. This looks like one of those segments of a spy film where two people know that their room is bugged.

I don't know whether this film will change the minds of those who have taken our government at its word and agreed that Edward Snowden is a traitor. Even if this is the case, this is a film that ought to be seen, because he is right that it is not right for a government to resort to such a massive invasion of privacy without being challenged that this is against the very Constitution it is supposed to uphold. Thus far this is as much as we can learn from the other (nongovernmental) side of the debate. Viewers will find a host of issues to think about and discuss, issues that deal with our very right for privacy. It is one thing when a person voluntarily gives this up by posting on social media, but it

is something else when a shadowy agency does this in the name of "national security."

This film with a set of discussion questions will be in the Dec. 2014 issue of Visual Parables.