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# MINNPOST

## Why Putin relishes the Snowden affair

By Nick Hayes | 06/27/13



REUTERS/Sergei Karpukhin

A television screens the image of former NSA contractor Edward Snowden during a news bulletin at a cafe at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport on Wednesday.

Russian President Vladimir **Putin is putting his own spin** on the Edward Snowden NSA security leak story.

Speaking at a press conference in Helsinki Wednesday, Putin said the Snowden affair was not that big of a deal. He cast the story of a major breach of U.S. security, the embarrassingly inept U.S. pursuit of a fugitive and the sudden flare-up of confrontational rhetoric between Washington and Moscow as nothing but small change.

Always rather pithy in his off-the-cuff-style remarks, he delivered one of his “putinisms” to characterize his view of the story: “In any case, I would not like to deal with such issues because it is like shearing a pig: There’s lots of squealing and little fleece.”

The week before the United States inadvertently set up the story as if pitching a softball to Putin. The United States charged Snowden with espionage under one of our nation's more questionable legal statutes, the Espionage Act of 1917. It and a second law passed a year later, the Sedition Act, took aim at pacifists, socialists and dissidents who opposed U.S. entry into World War I.



The law's most famous victim was the leader of the Socialist Party, Eugene V. Debs, who received a 10-year prison sentence for speaking out against the law. The legislation has provided legal cover for such dubious chapters in our history as the first "Red Scare" in 1919 -- conducted by President Woodrow Wilson's attorney general, Mitchell Palmer (with the enthusiastic assistance of his right-hand man, a young J. Edgar Hoover) -- and McCarthyism in the early 1950s, for which U.S. Sen. Joseph McCarthy also enjoyed the help of Hoover.

Putin appears to relish the Snowden affair as an opportunity to deliver a bit of payback to the Obama administration. Thanks to **Wikileaks in 2009**, Putin learned that at precisely the time the Obama administration publicly promised to "re-set" U.S. and Russia relations, privately officials within the State Department caricatured the Russian leader and described his regime as a "mafia state."

Thanks to Snowden's leaking of NSA documents, Putin has learned that the United States was eavesdropping on telephone conversations at the 2009 G20 Summit of then-President Dmitry Medvedev. If that's how Obama treated Medvedev, whom the president called "my friend, Dmitry," how would he treat Putin? You can't accuse Obama and Putin of being hypocritical about their relationship. They have never pretended to like one another.

The Snowden affair is also Putin's way of marking July's third anniversary of the **CIA's exposé of Russian "sleepers,"** the case involving 10 FSB (the successor to the infamous KGB of the Soviet era) spies planted in the United States.

The episode was a fiasco and singular embarrassment to the Russian security forces. Putin can only hope that the FSB's counterparts in the CIA and NSA are at least as embarrassed by the knowledge that Snowden is now in Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport.

## No moral high ground

No one has the high moral ground in this story. Snowden, the self-proclaimed patriot acting to expose our government's threats to our civil rights, turns for help to China and Russia, who are on nobody's list of defenders of civil rights and champions of transparency in government. The United States

stoops to the Espionage Act to prosecute Snowden. Putin simply couldn't resist taking a few cheap shots at the U.S.

He scored a few points for his FSB in its never-ending game with the U.S. intelligence agencies. He gained a bit of credibility for his favorite jibe that the United States is hypocritical in its criticism of Russia's disregard of civil rights and society. Points made.

In his remarks in Helsinki, Putin also complained that Snowden was "becoming a headache for Russia." He offered a truce in exchange of neo-Cold War rhetoric that came with Snowden's arrival in Moscow on Sunday and suggested instead a grown-up conversation about the legalities of extradition, international air space and a diplomatic solution.

He wants this confrontation with Washington to come out as a draw. He certainly does not want to come out as the ally of Snowden or Wikileaks' Julian Assange or pretend that he shares their commitment to transparency in government.

To extend Putin's own adage a bit, he has all the fleece he will get from shearing this pig. Putin has nothing more to gain from prolonging the Snowden affair and probably wishes that Snowden had boarded today's Aeroflot Flight 150 from Moscow to Havana.

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