



Silenced Discussion Guide

Director: James Spione

Year: 2014

Time: 103 min

You might know this director from:

Incident in New Baghdad (2011)

Inauguration: Spirit of the Crowd (2009)

American Farm (2005)

FILM SUMMARY

45 days after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Congress passed the USA Patriot Act. Many people believed that liberties once expected as rights suddenly became luxuries only afforded to those playing by the government's rulebook. Through the stories of three national security whistleblowers, *SILENCED* is a riveting and bold dissection of the expanse of government secrecy and the treatment of whistleblowers in a post-9/11 world.

"It is not a career goal to become a whistleblower," stated Thomas Drake, ex-NSA official whose life changed dramatically after reporting governmental misdoings to the press. The story is much the same for John Kiriakou, an ex-CIA analyst who given a 30-month jail sentence for disclosing the government's inexcusable torture regime in the War on Terror, as well as for Jesselyn Radack, ex-Department of Justice Ethics Adviser who was outcast after exposing the FBI's bold lies regarding the interrogation of an alleged terrorist.

Exposing the truth often comes with a cost, and indeed, Drake, Kiriakou, and Radack have lost spouses, children, and jobs. They've been shunned by the community, viewed as traitors, and imprisoned for shedding light on the wrongdoings of their democratic nation. These whistleblowers, all speaking for the first time in one film, reveal an insiders narrative of the U.S. government's responses to unauthorized disclosures. More importantly, they reveal the courage, conviction, and character it takes to stand up against repression, to uphold the truth.

FILM THEMES

As fear washed over the U.S. population following September 11th, the government scrambled to keep a nation safe. But national security came at a rising cost that was shrouded in secrecy, with those who spoke up against the internal injustices they witnessed paying the ultimate price.

SECRECY ABOVE ALL ELSE

In the minutes, months, and years following 9/11, government protocol underwent a sea change. The rules that civil servants had been trained to follow, and the Constitution they had fought to uphold, were no longer relevant. Replaced with a grey area of practices and a determination to maintain secrecy in the name of national security, civil servants were expected to adjust to this new way of working in the dark. Anyone who shined the light on the new modus operandi faced an uncertain future.

THE WEIGHT OF SACRIFICE

When the whistleblowers came out and said their piece, the reactions of their colleagues was more often than not of ignorance and dismay. With the majority of those in government positions intent on maintaining their jobs rather than reporting alleged wrongdoings, those who stood up and sought their own justice did so in solitude - and were condemned. Drake, Kiriakou, Raddack, and Edward Snowden were arguably unaware of the full extent of the sacrifice they would make by blowing the whistle - financial despair and personal detriment included. And yet none would reverse their decision. As Snowden stated, "It was the right thing to do and I have no regrets." No matter how heavy the sacrifice or how damning the outcome, knowing that they fought for their own personal form of truth and justice was reason enough.

MEDIA AS THE VOICE

The media plays an indispensable role in offering whistleblowers a platform through which to expose their message. Without the channel of communication journalists provide, these stories might never be told. As Thomas Jefferson said, an informed citizenry is crucial to democracy. So when a government begins directing its power against its own employees, a whistleblower is only as strong - and as realized - as the voice s/he is provided with. This power rests in the hands of the press.

PROMISES WORTH BREAKING?

What is a pledge of allegiance? When should a promise be broken? The whistleblowers in SILENCED may have acted in disagreement with their government, but they were acting in accordance with their interpretation of right vs. wrong. Although they've been accused of breaking the oath they took when accepting a government official role, the loyalty shown to their nation and fellow citizens remains true. "I had taken an oath. I had to deal with a government who was in violation of the oath, and I couldn't remain silent," said Thomas Drake. Jesselyn Raddack expressed a similar sentiment. The U.S. government, on the other hand, arguably broke their Constitutional oaths by extending their powers that bit too far, and those who blew the whistle are the ones who served the time.

"I could not live with myself knowing that another human being could be put to death because I kept my mouth shut."

Jesselyn Raddack

"Whistleblowers have become an endangered species. The government has decided that they need to become extinct."

Thomas Drake

FILM FACTS:

- Only 11 Americans have ever been charged under the Espionage Act of 1917, and 8 of those under the Obama administration. Some say this is due to the fact that it is now easier to track the leaker than it was before. “More and more of our communications leave easily accessible electronic footprints, whether it’s email or phone records or downloads of documents on classified networks,” says Steven Aftergood, director of the Project on Government Secrecy at the Federation of American Scientists.
- Daniel Ellsberg released the Pentagon Papers, which led to President Nixon’s indictment, while working as a military analyst, making him the first to be convicted under the Espionage Act.
- Former CIA employee Edward Snowden leaked information of U.S. and British top-secret mass surveillance programs to the press. The documentary Citizenfour by Laura Poitras tells his story.
- The first recorded whistleblower dates back to 1777, when Samuel Shaw, a member of the U.S. military, exposed questionable tactics the military was using against the British troops. After this, the Continental Congress enacted the Whistleblower Protection Act in 1778.
- SILENCED won a number of awards, including the Founders Award at the 2014 Traverse City Film Festival.
- Whistleblowers work in any faction of life and are not only related to national security. Cathy Harris, a customs official, confirmed baseless accusations of foreigners being accused of smuggling drugs in order for customs officials to receive overtime. Harris’ whistleblowing led to legal detention time of alleged smugglers being reduced from four days to two hours.
- As of 2015, the U.K. and Hungary are the only EU countries with functioning whistleblower protection laws in place. Romania, Luxemburg, and Slovenia have laws which are more limited in scope. The remaining 22 EU countries either have very limited or basically no legal protection specifically designed for whistleblowers.
- Articles 32 and 33 of the U.N.’s Convention Against Corruption, founded in 2003, provide international protection for whistleblowers.
- The National Security Agency (NSA) collects signal intelligence across the globe from listening platforms under the sea, in outer space, in foreign countries, on ships, and on aircraft. The agency also develops U.S. codes and tries to break the codes of other countries.
- The U.S.A. Patriot Act, passed 45 days after 9/11, was the first of many surveillance laws enabling the government to direct its foreign surveillance equipment and techniques on U.S. citizens.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Become involved with the Government Accountability Project, of which Jesselyn Radack is the Director of National Security and Human Rights.
2. Connect with Transparency International, which works to end corruption around the world.
3. Report corruption. The National Whistleblowers Center offers information and assistance.
4. Consider donating to the Whistleblower Support Fund, a non-profit organization that provides support and counsel to whistleblowers.

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Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.