

ATTACKED BY OBAMA - EDWARD SNOWDEN

The Snowden Psychiatric Smear

Discrediting whistleblowers with the ‘narcissist’ label

EMILY MASTERS

Jeffrey Toobin of the **New Yorker** ([6/10/13](#)) slammed National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden as “a grandiose narcissist who deserves to be in prison,” and the leak as “an act that speaks more to his ego than his conscience.”

Washington Post commentator Richard Cohen ([6/10/13](#)) called Snowden “merely narcissistic.” A day later, Matt Miller of the **Washington Post** ([6/11/13](#)) wrote a column headlined “Edward Snowden’s Grandiosity.” A week after the leak, Bob Schieffer declared on **Face the Nation** ([6/16/13](#); **Mediaite**, [6/16/13](#)), “I think what we have in Edward Snowden is just a narcissistic young man who has decided he is smarter than the rest of us.”

 Masters

Narcissism is more than mere vanity.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as “a stage in the normal psychological development of children which may be reverted to in adulthood during mental illness.” It is often linked with [Narcissistic Personality Disorder](#), a psychiatric illness the National Institutes of Health’s PubMed Health service describes as “a condition in which people have an excessive sense of self-importance, an extreme preoccupation with themselves, and lack of empathy for others.”

And journalists have long used terms like “narcissism” and “grandiose” to pathologize—and discredit—whistleblowers.

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is regularly called narcissistic (**Boston Herald**, [5/31/13](#); **Washington Times**, [12/2/10](#); **Chicago Tribune**, [12/5/10](#)). **CNN**([10/29/12](#)) described him as “prone to making grandiose statements,” while the **New York Times** ([4/18/12](#)) quoted colleagues calling him “grandiose and paranoid.”

Bradley Manning hasn’t dodged the “narcissist” label either (**Detroit News**, [12/27/10](#)). The **New York Times** ([8/8/10](#)) wondered if Manning’s “delusions of grandeur” led to his whistleblowing, and reported: “He professed a perhaps inflated sense of purpose, he called himself ‘emotionally fractured’ and a ‘wreck’ and said he was ‘self-medicating like crazy.’”

Where did journalists learn this handy trick? Richard Nixon employed his “plumbers” to burglarize Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist’s office for anything that might discredit him (**New York Times**, [6/30/07](#)). Ellsberg was also called “grandiose” and “narcissistic” in Tom Wells’ biography (**L.A. Times**, [9/9/01](#)).

Even things that have thankfully been eliminated from medical standards, such as homosexuality (which was deleted from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders in 1973) are still apparently journalistic fair game.

The **Washington Post**’s Cohen ([6/10/13](#)) said Snowden would be remembered as a “cross-dressing Little Red Riding Hood”—a reference to Glenn Greenwald’s profile of Snowden (**Guardian**, [6/9/13](#)) that described Snowden using a red hood over his laptop to protect his passwords.

This sort of homophobic jab is something **WikiLeaks** whistleblower Bradley Manning experienced as well (Lowell **Sun**, [12/30/10](#)).

When the news broke that Manning was gay, his sexuality and mental health quickly became a topic of media speculation (**WL Central**, [7/11](#)).

Attacking Edward Snowden's character with an amateur understanding of mental health medicine not only distracts from the real public issue at hand—the secret mass surveillance of U.S. citizens—but also further marginalizes an already highly stigmatized portion of our society, which includes 58 million Americans.

Few journalists have spoken out against the psychiatric smear, or what it says about the state of our media and society. However, on a recent episode of **PBS Newshour** ([6/14/13](#)), we got a quick glimpse:

DAVID BROOKS: I do attack [Snowden] for being a grandiose narcissist.

MARK SHIELDS: Is that a felony?

BROOKS: No.

SHIELDS: Thank goodness.

BROOKS: It's a plague around here.

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