

# 5 Famous Whistleblowers Who Shaped History

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Ever since he came forward as the source behind the leaks that outed PRISM, Edward Snowden has received an enormous amount of attention from the media.

Whether history will hail him as a hero, [as polls suggest](#), or, as Jeffrey Toobin recently suggested in the *New Yorker*, a [“grandiose narcissist who deserves to be in prison.”](#) Edward Snowden is only the most recent successor in a line of whistleblowers that have shaped contemporary history.

Let's take a look at some of Snowden's forerunners and examine how they have fared:

## 1. Daniel Ellsberg

A former U.S. military analyst employed by the RAND corporation, in 1971, Ellsberg leaked a top-secret Pentagon study of the U.S. government's rationale behind its decisions during the Vietnam War. These documents, known as the Pentagon Papers, were widely published by The New York Times, The Washington Post, and other American newspapers.

In a [1998 interview](#), Ellsberg said, “The public is lied to every day by the President, by his spokespeople, by his officers. If you can't handle the thought that the President lies to the public for all kinds of reasons, you couldn't stay in the government at that level.”

In the years since the release of the Pentagon Papers, Ellsberg has become an activist, and was awarded the [Right Livelihood Award](#) in 2006. He has spoken in favor of Bradley Manning and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, calling them [“two new heroes of mine.”](#)

On June 10, Ellsberg posted on his website, "In my estimation, there has not been in American history a more important leak than Edward Snowden's release of NSA material ... Snowden's whistleblowing gives us the possibility to roll back a key part of what has amounted to an 'executive coup' against the US constitution."

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### 2. W. Mark Felt, a.k.a "Deep Throat"

Better known as "Deep Throat," W. Mark Felt was an FBI agent who leaked information about the Watergate scandal to *Washington Post* journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Following President Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974, Felt denied his role as a whistleblower for thirty years before revealing himself in a 2005 *Vanity Fair* article in which Felt was quoted as saying, "I'm the guy they called Deep Throat." At the time, Felt was 91-years-old.

### 3. Bradley Manning

While deployed in Iraq, U.S. Army Pvt. Bradley Manning downloaded a trove of military and diplomatic information, including over 500,000 army reports and classified combat videos, to WikiLeaks. One of these videos, a recording of a U.S. Apache helicopter opening fire on a group of civilians in Eastern Baghdad, has over 13 million views on YouTube.

Manning's leaks, which surfaced in 2010, caused a political disturbance not just in the United States, but also in the Middle East, where they helped to catalyze the Arab Spring.

Pvt. Manning is now on trial at Fort Meade, Maryland, for charges that include "aiding the enemy." He now faces up to 20 or more years of imprisonment.

### 4. Julian Assange

Founder and editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks, Mr. Assange's organization has been responsible for over 1.2 million leaks to date since the website's creation in 2006.

In a recent interview with *Sky News*, Assange pronounced Edward Snowden "a hero who has informed the public about one of the most serious events of the decade."

Assange has spent the last year holed up in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he is seeking political asylum from charges against him in Sweden. Today marks the one-year anniversary of his stay at the embassy.

Mazel tov, Julian.

## 5. Aaron Swartz

Internet pioneer, skilled hacker, and creator of the social news site Reddit, at age 24, Swartz hacked into JSTOR, an academic journal database, and systematically downloaded over four million articles through the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's computer network.

He was arrested by MIT campus police in 2011, and was subjected to a barrage of federal charges, including up to \$1 million in fines and 50 years in prison. In January, Swartz was found dead in his Brooklyn apartment, where he had hanged himself.

Unlike many of his whistleblower contemporaries, Aaron Swartz did not leak classified government documents, but rather scholarly articles that were already available to anyone with a JSTOR subscription. It was federal prosecutor Carmen Ortiz, not MIT or JSTOR, who decided to go after Swartz with 13 felony indictments. Swartz's family and friends have accused the government of employing excessive prosecutorial zeal in the case, stating that the justice system cornered Swartz and ultimately drove him to take his own life.

Interestingly, one week after Swartz's death, WikiLeaks tweeted that Swartz was in contact with Julian Assange during 2010-11 and had at one point been a WikiLeaks source. These claims only add to the shroud of mystery that surrounds one of the internet age's most passionate crusaders for transparency.

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