

THE SNOWDEN FILES

The Inside Story of the
World's Most Wanted Man

LUKE HARDING



VINTAGE BOOKS

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New York

THE BROOM CUPBOARD

New York Times office,
Eighth Avenue, New York
Summer to Winter 2013

‘You come here often. #nsapickuplines’

JOKE ON TWITTER

The room is a glorified broom cupboard. A few paintings belonging to the late Arthur Sulzberger, Snr, are stacked against a wall. One print shows a newspaper man puffing on a cigar; above him are the words: ‘Big Brother is watching you’. (A note says Arthur will review the paintings ‘when he returns’. He died in 2012.) There are strip lights, a small table, a couple of chairs. No windows. On a metal shelf, boxes of cream-coloured envelopes. They belong to Arthur Sulzberger, Jr, – Arthur senior’s heir – and the current publisher of the *New York Times*. On the corridor outside are photos of the *Times*’s Pulitzer Prize winners. They are a distinguished bunch. From the staff cafeteria comes the hum of intelligent chatter.

The offices of the *New York Times* are on Eighth

Avenue, in midtown New York. The paper's executive stationery cupboard was to play an unlikely role in the Snowden story. It was from here that the *Guardian* carried on its reporting of the NSA files, in partnership with the *Times*, after its London operation was shut down. The cupboard was pokey. It was also extremely secure. Access was highly restricted; there were guards, video cameras and other measures. Its location on US soil meant that the journalists who worked there felt they enjoyed something they didn't have in London: the protection of the US constitution.

In the US, the Obama administration distanced itself from the destruction of the *Guardian's* hard drives – an act widely condemned by EU organisations, the rest of the world, and the UN's special rapporteur on freedom of expression. Evidently, the White House wasn't delighted by the Snowden revelations. But it understood the first amendment guaranteed press freedom. No such smashing up could happen in America, White House officials said.

Two days after the GCHQ hobbits supervised the destruction, the British government followed up Rusbridger's offer. It asked the *Guardian* to identify the paper's US media partners. The editor told them it was working with the *New York Times* and the non-profit ProPublica.

But it was another three and a half weeks before the UK's foreign office did anything about the intelligence.

On 15 August, Philip Barton, Britain's deputy ambassador in the US, finally put in a call to Jill Abramson, the *Times's* executive editor. He requested a meeting. Abramson had been planning to travel to DC anyway. She had arranged to see James Clapper, the embattled director of national intelligence. Not about Snowden but about the alarming frequency with which the administration was exerting pressure on the *Times's* reporters, particularly those covering intelligence matters.

'We have decades of experience publishing sensitive stories dealing with national security,' Abramson says. In 1972 the *Times* published the Pentagon Papers, during the Arthur Sulzberger era. 'We're never cavalier. We take them [senior administration officials] seriously. But if a war is being waged against terrorism, people need to know the dimensions of that war.'

The deputy ambassador invited Abramson to drop into the British embassy. Rusbridger advised against doing so, on grounds of spycraft. So Abramson eventually agreed to meet at the ambassador's residence, rather than at the embassy itself, which was technically on UK soil: who knew what British spooks might get up to there? At the meeting, Barton requested the return of the Snowden documents or their destruction. The UK-related leaks made his government uneasy, he said. Abramson neither confirmed nor denied that the *Times* possessed Snowden material. She promised to go away and think about it.

Two days later she called Barton back to say that the *Times* was declining his request. According to Abramson, 'The meeting was a non-event. I never heard from them again.' The British foreign office, it seemed, was merely going through the formal motions. Rusbridger had made clear that the material existed in many jurisdictions. ProPublica in New York had also been working with the *Guardian* for several months, as Number 10 knew. The British made no attempt to approach them.