

Unmasking the Surveillance State: Patrick Eddington's Fight for Government Transparency

By Joshua Hardman

Patrick Eddington was a CIA whistleblower. Now, he's keeping all intelligence agencies accountable.



Earlier this year, Patrick G. Eddington exposed a disturbing case of government overreach: The Justice Department thwarted legislation that could have reformed a secretive surveillance program violating Americans' privacy (Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act). It was just the latest revelation from Eddington, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, who has been a relentless watchdog ever since he resigned from the CIA in 1996 after exposing agency lies about Operation Desert Storm. Since then, he has been waging a legal battle for transparency across the government, filing hundreds of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests and lawsuits with other Cato scholars.

"Cinematic" would be an apt word to describe his life's work. Eddington and his wife, Robin, hold the distinction of being the only married couple to blow the whistle on US surveillance agencies. In 1996, they both resigned from the CIA; the same year, they publicly accused the agency of hiding evidence that American troops were exposed to Iraqi chemical weapons during the Gulf War—weapons possibly built with materials exported from the United States.

During his time at the CIA, Eddington's job was to analyze satellite imagery of Soviet military activity, but in his off-hours, he was searching for proof that could corroborate reports of chemical-agent exposure among Gulf War veterans. His wife, meanwhile, was



Eddington viewing a mounted version of the October 30, 1996, *New York Times* article that reported on how he and his wife blew the whistle on the CIA's cover-up of chemical exposures among US troops during and after the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

investigating the same issue while working with the Senate Banking Committee. The Eddingtons shared information behind the scenes, but their findings were met with hostility from CIA officials, whose postwar reports denied any chemical exposure.

"I didn't care," Eddington says. "These were my fellow veterans. I could have been called up for duty myself, and it outraged me that officials were dismissing the soldiers' illnesses as being 'all in their heads.'" He had found a study showing cognitive damage in monkeys exposed to low-level chemical nerve agents—evidence CIA analysts had missed.

The *New York Times* later broke the story of the Eddingtons' findings: US military commanders had been warned of chemical weapons near American troops, but this information was hidden. After intense confrontations with agency officials and repeated denials of Robin Eddington's impending promotion, the couple resigned.

The agency, Eddington says, had no intention of reviewing the evidence objectively because he and his wife were viewed as outsiders. It's an organizational pathology highlighted by former CIA Director Robert Gates, who once described the CIA as "deeply averse to change"

and "one of the most closed bureaucracies in Washington."

After departing, Eddington spent the next four years volunteering and later doing paid work on behalf of sick Desert Storm veterans. Afterward, Rep. Rush Holt (D-NJ) hired him as a policy adviser. To this day, Holt is the only member of Congress to hire a national security whistleblower, and policymakers on both sides of the aisle looked to his office for expertise on surveillance issues during his tenure.

Since then, Eddington's expertise in navigating the labyrinth of government secrecy through FOIA requests has put Cato in a class of its own. The FBI recently labeled Cato a "vexsome" organization filing FOIA requests—a badge of honor in Eddington's book.

Two years ago, he unearthed troubling abuses by the FBI in its use of "assessments"—a type of investigation into Americans' communications and associations without any criminal basis. "If that sounds like a recipe for abuse, you're right," Eddington says. "I had no idea they could open an investigation without a warrant until I started digging." This discovery triggered a Government Accountability Office probe into the FBI, but the fight isn't over.

Eddington is also now locked in a legal battle with the Justice Department over its mishandling of the Section 702 surveillance program. Under Section 702, Americans' private communications are swept into a database along with those of foreign nationals. Warrantless searches of these data violate the Fourth Amendment, yet the government openly claims it conducted 3.4 million such searches in 2021 and several hundred thousand in 2022. Eddington argues that these queries often have little to

do with real national security threats.

Congress recently extended the Section 702 program, in part because the Department of Justice withheld key information about its misuse. Eddington's FOIA requests uncovered that the Justice Department had misled a federal judge about the department's ability to deliver program audits, stalling just long enough for Congress to vote on its extension. Now, with litigation ongoing, Eddington continues to press for answers about how deep the abuse runs.

"All federal judges need to take a hard look at the executive branch when it comes to surveillance cases," he warns.

Patrick Eddington has spent decades pulling back the curtain on government secrecy, and his work is far from over. FOIA remains a powerful tool for uncovering the truth, and in Eddington's hands, it's a weapon against unchecked power. As long as government agencies seek to evade accountability, Eddington will be a watchdog and advocate for Americans' constitutional rights.

To learn more about how intelligence agencies have evolved over the years, you can read Eddington's upcoming book, *The Triumph of Fear: Domestic Surveillance and Political Repression from McKinley to Eisenhower* (April 2025); for a deep dive into his time at the CIA, read *Long Strange Journey: An Intelligence Memoir*. ♦

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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