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Son Better Off in Russia, Snowden's Dad Says

By The Moscow Times

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Lon Snowden speaking on the "Today" show in New York on Friday. **Peter Kramer**

McLEAN, Virginia — The father of National Security Agency leaker Edward Snowden said Friday that his son has been so vilified by the Obama administration and members of Congress that he is now better off staying in Russia.

Lon Snowden of Allentown, Pennsylvania, had been working behind the scenes with lawyers to try to find a way his son could get a fair trial in the U.S. Edward Snowden has been charged in federal court with violating the Espionage Act by leaking details of NSA surveillance.

But in a telephone interview, the elder Snowden said he had lost faith in recent weeks that his son would be treated fairly by the Justice Department. He now thinks his 30-year-old son is better off avoiding the U.S. if possible until an administration that respects the Constitution comes into office.

"If it were me, knowing what I know now, and listening to advice of sage people like [Pentagon Papers leaker] Daniel Ellsberg ... I would attempt to find a safe haven," Snowden said.

As a military analyst more than four decades ago, Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers, a secret study of America's involvement in Vietnam, to major newspapers.

The elder Snowden said he thought Russia was probably the best place to seek asylum because it is most likely to withstand U.S. pressure. Edward Snowden applied for temporary asylum in Russia last week.

Lon Snowden, a Coast Guard veteran who has worked on national security issues in his career, said he had tremendous faith in the American people and in the Constitution. He said that in a more subdued environment he felt confident that his son could get a fair trial and the leak would be considered in context of his son's desire to expose a surveillance program that he and others believe exceeds constitutional bounds.

But he said the Justice Department's efforts to pressure other countries to turn over Snowden, coupled with silence from President Barack Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder in the face of denunciations leveled by members of Congress who have labeled Snowden a traitor, have eroded his hope for a fair trial.

On NBC's "Today" show on Friday, Lon Snowden said there had been a concerted effort by some members of Congress to "demonize" his son.

Lon Snowden and his lawyer, Bruce Fein, released a letter Friday asking Obama to dismiss the criminal charges against Edward Snowden and to support legislation "to remedy the NSA surveillance abuses he revealed."

The elder Snowden and Fein said they were disgusted by Holder's letter Friday to Russian officials promising that Snowden would not face the death penalty if he were extradited. They said it reflected a mindset that Snowden was presumed guilty and that a sentence of 30 years or life would be a reasonable punishment.

In the phone interview, Lon Snowden said he has had no direct contact with his son and knows no more about his son's day-to-day life in Moscow, where he is reportedly staying at an airport transit zone, than anyone else.

More broadly, he expressed frustration that the story has become so focused on his son and his whereabouts and U.S. efforts to get him extradited, while the issues surrounding his son's disclosures of extensive surveillance programs that he says disregard the Constitution have been swept aside.

Lon Snowden said that talking about the issues that his son had raised allowed him to connect to his son and keep the issues he raised in front of the American people. He and Fein are starting a nonprofit group called the Defense of the Constitution Foundation to promote those ideas.

"In essence, he has passed on the torch of democracy," Lon Snowden said of his son.

Lon said he was also focused on the issues rather than on his son's personal situation in part because he was not sure there was much he could do to help him.

"He sacrificed everything and gained nothing," the elder Snowden said. "He's done what he's done. The consequences are unavoidable, and I don't know if I can mitigate those."

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